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Gospel George; OR, FIERY FRED, the OUTLAW.

A ROMANCE OF THE GOLD MINES.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

A CONTROVERSY WITH "OLD EPH."

"HARK! what's in the wind now?"

The speaker, a tall, likely young fellow, arose from the hole over which he had been crouching, and, pickax in hand, stood listening intently, with head on one side. The sound—a pistol-shot, at no great distance—was of double significance at that day and in that region—the palmy days of '54, along the head-waters of Pitt river, in the land of gold.

"Some fellow that's dogged us from North Fork, I'll bet a cookie!" growled a gaunt specimen of humanity, with a sort of disgust.

"Whoever it is, he's in trouble—just listen to that!"

Even as he spoke the favoring breeze bore to their ears several rapidly-succeeding pistol-

shots, followed by wild, piercing screams, as of one in mortal terror or great bodily pain.

"That settles it, boys!" cried Ned Allen, the young man who had first spoken, dropping his pickax and leaping out of the ditch. "Spy or no spy, we can't shut our ears to a cry like that. Look to your weapons, and get ready for work. Come!"

"Jest our pesky luck!" snorted Dick Barnes—"Grumbling Dick." "I 'most know thar was a thunderin' big nugget layin' right under my pick, an' somebody 'll find it afore we git back—that's my luck."

Side by side Dick and Ned breasted the sharp slope, gaining the ridge at the same moment, a few seconds in advance of their comrades. The wild yells for help still rent the air, coming from the little valley below, through which wound the clear, sparkling waters of the little river beside which the prospectors had pitched their temporary camp; but though the tones and some words were distinctly audible, their keenest glances could not discover the author.

"Begorra, luck at that!" cried stumpy, broad-faced Jem Daly. "Luck undher the tree that grows loike a umbrelly—the divel in a woolly overcoat. Mebbe it's bekaise he's too hot it is that he's kickin' up sich a divel's delight, a-youtlin'—"

"A grizzly—I knowed it!" snorted Grumbling Dick. "Bet thar's seventy-five million ov 'em round yere, jest a purpose to spile our diggin'—"

"Luck—luck a' that now? luck at the divel tryin' to shake acorns out o' that elm."

"It's a two-legged acorn, too—ha! look! he's gnawing down the sapling. Lively, boys, he'll be a dead man in less than ten minutes, if we don't put in our best kicks."

Even Barnes forgot to grumble as they saw the huge, shaggy monster grasp the slender pole of the tree and shake it violently. They saw that the man whose cries had startled them, partially lost his hold, his feet dangling below the lower limbs as its bushy top swayed swiftly to and fro. The grizzly saw this, too, and waddling forward, it struck at the dangling boots as a kitten plays with a suspended ball of yarn. But then the legs were drawn up once more, and with a sniff of disgust, the grizzly dropped upon all fours and attacked the slender trunk with his sharp teeth.

"Down to the bank, boys," cried Ned Allen, leading the way. "Give him the best you know how."

The stream was narrow, swiftly running between steep banks which rose several feet above the level of the water. Two yards beyond its further bank rose the bushy-topped elm-sapling



BEFORE GOSPEL GEORGE, WAS A ROUGHLY-CLAD MAN, GRINNING AS HE HELD HIS REVOLVER POINTED AT THE TRAILER'S HEAD.—Page 7.

in which the man had taken refuge from the grizzly.

A loud cry of joy broke from the stranger's lips as he heard the encouraging shouts of the prospecters, and saw them rushing to his assistance. The grizzly was equally upon the alert, and now, with head upon one side, growling menacingly, he eyed the crowd as it ranged along the opposite shore.

"Don't waste your bullets, boys," muttered Allen, as the revolvers clicked sharply. "Stand ready for a rush—he's no sheep. We must keep him from crossing, or some of us will make him a meal. Ready, now!"

Eleven revolvers spoke in a volley, and were handled by men who had, the least practiced, skill enough to plant a bullet into a smaller target at twice the distance. But thirty yards is a long range for pistol practice when "Old Eph" forms the target, even for Colt's "Navy," and though a snarling roar broke from the bear's distended jaw, the shower of lead appeared to affect it but little more than so many hail-stones.

Forgetting its intended victim in the tree-top, Bruin waddled to the bank of the river, the picture of furious rage. The pistols cracked merrily, but it seemed of little more use than popping at a granite boulder. Though repeatedly struck, the grizzly was neither cowed nor checked. Balancing for one moment upon the very edge of the bank, it plunged boldly into the stream, swimming strongly, evidently bent on revenge. Though a powerful swimmer, the current was swift and strong enough to sweep the brute twenty yards down-stream before he could make land.

Knowing as they did the danger of letting the bear secure a footing upon the same side with them, the prospecters plied their weapons busily, until the grizzly's head was dripping blood, yet all seemed in vain. The bear watched the shore, snorting furiously. The water was, fortunately, so deep that only head and shoulders appeared above it, so Bruin reached up his claw-armed paw to drag himself over the bank.

The prospecters had followed its progress, keeping abreast and firing at every opportunity, and Ned Allen led the rush as the huge form grasped the edge of the bank.

Their eagerness bade fair to ruin all. The undermined bank gave way beneath their tread. There was a wild scramble, yells and cries of alarm and terror, mingled with a heavy splash and half-stifled scream.

A cry of horror broke from Grumbling Dick's lips as he pointed to where two forms were struggling in the water—a man and a bear. It was Ned Allen, around whom the massive paw of the grizzly twined in the act of closing.

Confused and half-stunned with his fall, strangling and gasping, the young man had little control over his limbs. His fate seemed sealed; his friends were made nerveless by the sudden catastrophe, and but for a cooler head than theirs Allen would have paid the penalty with his life.

A tall, rough-clad figure burst through the group, hustling them aside like chickens, and boldly leaped over the bank, striking fairly upon Bruin's broad back, driving it far below the surface, even as its yellow claws touched Allen's shoulder. Then the wondering prospecters saw that the new-comer held a short-handled, heavy ax raised over his shoulder; they caught a glimpse of the bear's head only to see its stout skull crushed like an egg-shell as the bright weapon sunk eye-deep into bone and brain.

Releasing his grasp upon the handle, the stranger seized Allen and thrust him to shore, then, with one stout heave, sent him at full length upon the bank above, himself following a moment later.

"There's the way I does business," he said, with a chuckle, as he wrung the water from his longelf-locks. "Some o' you 'uns grasp ole Eph by the tail an' fling him out on shore. I don't want to lose my leetle hatchet. Lively—ef he gits in the gorge oncet, it's good-by, John!"

"You saved my life, sir, and it—" began Ned Allen, the moment he could recover enough breath to speak with, but his thanks were interrupted, bluntly enough.

"Bless ye, man, 'tain't worth speakin' on—it's a kinder way I've got; fact is, I can't grub nur snooze well unless I've did somethin' o' the kind, I've got so used to savin' people. Reckon I've reskied nigh onto ten thousan' feller-bein's jist that same way, in my time. Hyar, you suck this bottle a bit, while I go help the boys save that meat."

Allen took a short pull at the whisky-flask, then arose and glanced after his friends. They were engaged with the bear's carcass, and he was about hastening to their aid, when a splash in the water, opposite, arrested his attention. A man was rapidly swimming across the stream, and landed not far from where the bank had caved, scrambling up and shaking himself like a huge water-dog.

"How d'y do! Ef ever I war glad to see a feller-critter, it war you 'uns jist a little afore now. Glory to Jerusha's lamb! did you see how that e-tarnal overgrow'd bun'le o' dirty ha'r hustled me 'round? A double and twisted ager wasn't nothin' to the way he chucked me up an' down, this way an' that way, an'—"

"Set your jawin' tackle a-runnin', didn't it?" grinned the stranger who had played so conspicuous a part in the death of "Old Eph," as he drew near, carefully wiping the blood off his treasured ax, before slinging it at his waist.

"Ekil to my old woman—an' she could talk the bark off uv a black-oak knot in two minutes, by the watch. Talk! oh, Lord! Just look at my face an' hers, stranger. When she got to goin' it in real glory-to-Moses airnest, durned ef every word as retched me wouldn't take the hide plum off. Used to peel me that-a-way reg'lar oncet a month. Made money by it, too, she did. Used to sweep up the bits o' hide, dry 'em, an' then sell 'em to the boys 'round our neighborhood for rifle-patches. It's a scan'alous fac', gentlemen!"

"I want to know!" gasped the second stranger, with open mouth and staring eyes. "Didn't it hurt ye, mister?"

"Waal—I should re-mark! Was you ever skinned alive, stranger? Did any female woman ever use ye fer to mop up the floor with? Did anybody ever pull your ha'r ontill your toe-nails was dragged clean up to your knees? Was you ever scolded an' jawed at, day in an' day out, punched an' pinched, made to sleep on the bed-rail in warm, or at the lower end o' the bed fer to keep her feet warm in cold weather; was ye ever so 'bused an' miser'bly treated that you pined an' wasted away ontel they wasn't enough o' ye fer to make a shadder, ontel ye got so peskily audacious poor the sun would shine through ye so cl'ar the neighbors could see jist what you'd ett fer dinner, an' the crows an' turkey-buzzards 'd foller ye 'round all day with tears in their eyes, a-weepin' 'ca'se they wasn't no more meat on ye; an' the neighbor's boys a-wantin' to borry you o' your old woman fer to use as a 'jack' fer night-fishin'—a-sayin' it 'd be sech a savin' o' good fat-wood, es they could ketch enough lightnin'-bugs fer ye to swaller, which 'd shine through yer ribs clearer 'n wood? I ax you, stranger, ca'mly an' airnestly, did you ever hev sech a 'sperience as them? Ef you hev, take warnin' by me. Show some mercy to them poor critters as haven't got legs long enough to run away from ye; tie a double knot in your tongue. They hain't no more mis'able death than to be talked to death. 'Skeeters an' bed-bugs ain't no whar. Thar was a time when I could talk a two-forty streak, but she cured me. Now, ten out o' every nine fellers I meet ax me how I lost my tongue. I hain't talked any fer so long that they's ha'r growed on my teeth, nigh two inches long. They was a time—lis'en, an' I'll tell ye all—"

"Jest my luck!" interposed Grumbling Dick, with a look of annoyance. "Thar never wasn't any critter as likes a good story better'n me, but, stranger, I've got a 'portant 'ngagement fer next Christmas, an' I'm 'feared I'd be too late if I stayed yere untel ye got done."

The advocate of taciturnity—in others—good humoredly joined in the laugh which followed, and all traces of ill-humor vanished like magic. This is worthy of remark, for it is rare indeed that rival prospecters will fraternize, each party fearing that the other may claim a share in their prospective "rich strike."

"Old Eph" was quickly butchered. Meantime, the talkative stranger—who had given his name as "Gospel George"—summoned his steed from the wooded hillside, and while loading the bear-meat upon it, discoursed eloquently upon the rare merits and sterling qualities of his "muel."

"They's only one thing she can't do—that is talk; but she kin onderstan' every word she hears spoke. An' kick—now you air talkin'! Just look at that behind fist o' her'n—ain't it a picture? An' can't she use it, though! Gentlemen, I'm the dog-gondest richest grazin' ground for fleas you ever hearn tell on. Ef 'twasn't for that air mule, I'd be all too full o' holes to hold water—I would so! Ha! now I'll show—durn the luck! I thought they was one a-bitin' me then, so I could show ye how she works. I'd jist tell her—that's Roxy Ann, yonder, gentlemen; I'd jist tell her what it was a-grazin' at. She'd measure her distance—send out that left duke o' her'n, an' thar'd be a broken-backed flea quicker'n a duck kin swaller a tum'le bug—fact! She's worth a thousan' dollars jist for that, is Roxy Ann—saves such a powerful heap in the war and t'ar o' finger nails."

"Gospel George" was evidently a character, and Ned Allen regarded him with an interest by no means lessened by the fact that but for his prompt aid, a frightful death would almost certainly have been his portion that day.

Tall and well-proportioned, though built more for lithe activity than brute force, Gospel George was evidently something past the prime of life, if years alone be considered, since his hair and beard, both worn long and full, were thickly streaked with silver. His small gray eyes were keen and shrewd, his nose curved like an eagle's beak, his forehead high and full. His voice was of remarkable compass, now deep and sonorous, again shrill and singing, yet never discordant, constantly varying according to his words. Yet, while idly talking, his eyes were never still. He seemed to be looking, looking for something which he was fated never to find. These glances rested longer and more frequently upon the face of the man whom "Old Eph" had treed, and

after the prospector's camp was gained, he bluntly asked that worthy his name, business, and what brought him into that lone region.

"That's a mighty long story to be told in few words, stranger," slowly responded the man, lying at length beside the blazing fire—for the cool shades of night were drawing near—pulling rapidly at his pipe between sentences. "You'll see it some day put in all the papers o' the land in the biggest kind o' letters, when onct I git back hum an' folks knows what I know. They called me 'Sorrel-top,' back thar," he grinned, touching his shaggy mane of red hair. "Sorrel-top an' Mutton-head; they said I didn't hev sense enough to last me over night. Jist wait ontel I git home an' show 'em what I've found—guess not!"

"Found—what?" eagerly asked Tom Weston, leaning forward.

Sorrel-top grinned, knowingly.

"Dad used to lick me like blazes for talkin' too much—folks wanted to know how he sold so much pork when he didn't raise no fattenin' hogs, and I told 'em. Didn't he lamm me, though! But I run away, jined some fellows, an' worked my way out here. The boys made me cook an' wash fer 'em; said that's all I was fit for. Used to lick me, too, jist fer fun. Then I putt some weeds in thar soup, an' made 'em sicker'n a dog what's got ambeer in both eyes. They 'most killed me—when they got well enough to stan' up—an' kicked me out o' camp."

"That was rough on you."

"Orful!" snickered Sorrel-top. "So rough I'd 'a' paid 'em a year's wages rather then hed 'em not do it. No, sir! that's one time the fool fooled the wise men. Ef I'd axed to leave 'em, they'd 'spected somethin'; an' would 'a' followed me ontel they knowed what I knowed—an' then like's not 'd 'a' planted me too deep to hear Gabriel's horn ef he tooted till his cheeks bu'sted an' his wind giv' out. But I was too smart for 'em, I was!" and he suddenly extended one hand half full of bright, gleaming particles. "Look at that! an' I know whar thar's jist dead loads o' the same stuff—I kin load a flat-boat down with it—you hear me!"

"And what do you suppose it is?" inquired Allen, after examining a pinch of the stuff.

"What! don't you know gold when you see it? A purty digger you be!" contemptuously.

"A pound of that stuff wouldn't buy a second-hand quid of tobacco, man; it's nothing but sel—"

"Ain't it gold?" faltered Sorrel-top, his jaw falling.

"Nothing like it, friend; not worth so much gravel," replied Allen, smothering his mirth with a feeling of pity for the simple fellow. "Never mind; better luck next time. How about the grizzly? Tell us about that."

"'Twas another fool trick," muttered Sorrel-top, disgustedly. "A fool I was born, an' a fool I'll die, I reckon. You see, I was pickin' some berries, when that varmint came up. From the way he gobbled 'em down, I saw thar wouldn't be hafe enough for us both, so I thought I'd skeer him off. I chucked a rock at him—hit him on the nose; but he didn't skeer worth a cent. When I seed them big teeth, I 'cluded 'twasn't healthy 'round thar, an' left in a hurry. I made the tree, an' that's all. The more I shot, the more the ugly brute wouldn't die. I yelled for help, an' you fellers came; but I 'most wish you'd staid away. Anyhow, I'd 'a' died a rich man."

"You ain't the fust feller as got fooled on that blamed stuff," quoth Gospel George. "I won't forgit it very soon. One time I was out huntin', down nigh Greased Land, whar I hed a big stock farm—nigh seventeen hundred million head o' stock. Was out huntin', run across a hull mountain o' that stuff; went back home, didn't say nothin' to nobody; up an' shot every durned one o' my cattle—tuck me two years an' eleven months to kill 'em off—sot fire to my house and corrals; borried a mule to go an' kerry off my mountain o' gold; tuck a load to the settlements; found out what it was—an' mebbe I didn't cuss—oh, no! Was so pesky mad I sot down ahind that mule an' sot to work tickling its hind heels; wouldn't waste a charge o' powder on my fool self. 'Nother fool trick, that was. Mule did its level best, but mine was such a 'tarnal thick blockhead, it onldy bu'sted up its hoofs and crippled it fer life. Anner got after me fer damages—I puckacheed—come up yere, whar I run against you fellers, an' thar you hev my hist'ry, true es gospel. 'Most as romantic as his'n, ain't it?" soberly added Gospel George, with a quick, searching glance at the vacant features of Sorrel-top.

There was little more conversation that evening. Fatigued with the toils of the day, the prospecters soon wrapped their blankets around them and dropped off to sleep.

The moon rolled on, bright and clear, until some time after midnight, then the clear, starry vault was rapidly overspread with broken masses of clouds, while the rising breeze howled mournfully through the rocky defiles and crags. The moon passed beneath a cloud. When it emerged, there was a change in the prospecters' camp. Only twelve figures surrounded the dying embers. One was missing.

Another figure suddenly started up on one el-

bow, just as the moon again disappeared. There was a quick, sharp snort—a brief, confused trampling of hoofs—a series of shrill, ear-splitting yells, followed by a wild rush through brush and over boulders, down the valley.

A sharp report—a warning yell; and the prospectors sprung to their feet, bewildered and confused, fearing they knew not what.

CHAPTER II.

A WONDERFUL "FIND."

"It's a nasty place—a monstrous nasty place. I 'most wish we'd 'cluded to turn back an' try t'other trail."

"Le's do it, father—I'm sure it'd be better," eagerly responded a sallow, thin-faced woman. "I know they'll be a smash-up ef we try to go down here."

"Turn back and lose three good days! That's jest like your family—they wasn't one but'd skeer at his own shadder wuss than a yearlin' colt. Lose three more days when we've lost so much a'ready? Not much! You, boys! dig that rope—lively, now! we can't stop yere all day."

Thus spoke Jonathan Grey, as he gnawed off a section of home-made twist, the product of his own little tobacco-patch down in the lowlands of Missouri, but despite the bold words, there was an uneasy look in his black eye, at the dubious prospect before him.

At his feet lay a beautiful valley, nearly one half-mile broad by thrice that in length, buried between high, projecting hills or ranges, and running from north-east to south-west. A stream of considerable power ran through this valley, and some two hundred yards below the upper gorge, spreading out into a lovely, miniature lake of perhaps three hundred yards in diameter, then winding placidly on until lost to view through the lower pass. Here and there were scattered a few little clumps of timber, while all around the wild grasses grew in wonderful luxuriance.

Nothing of all this beauty attracted the eye of Jonathan Grey. He knew that he must cross this valley, or else waste several days by taking the back track and striking into another trail which, for all he knew to the contrary, might end in difficulties even worse than this. He could see that a broad pass led through the opposite gorge. Once in the valley and across the river, and he believed that all would be well.

"I'll do it or bu'st a b'iler! Make haste thar with the rope, Jotham—an' you wimmen critters bun'le out o' thar: ain't no use in runnin' more resk than kin be helped."

Three women and two young children alighted from the dingy weather-worn tilted wagon. One end of a stout rope was secured to the hind axle, then passed around the trunk of a stunted pine, and firmly clutched by five pairs of stout hands. Jonathan Grey freed the leading yoke of oxen, looked carefully to the rough-locks, then cautiously started up his cattle.

The hill sloped down at an angle of rather more than forty degrees, rough and broken here and there by cracks and crevices, by loose boulders and ugly points of rocks. No cattle in the world could have controlled a wagon on such a descent, even with all wheels locked, but aided by the stout rope a safe descent was barely possible. There would have been less risk had the route been smooth enough to dispense with cattle altogether, but that was out of the question. There were several sharp turns to be made that one pair of hands—and all others were absolutely required to manage the rope—could not have effected. The stream ran swiftly and apparently deep along the foot of the hill, yet far enough distant to allow a fair turn to be made to seek a safer crossing below.

Foot by foot the wagon was lowered, the sturdy oxen holding back until the yoke pressed hard against their horns. Twice the wagon was securely blocked by huge stones, until the rope could be changed to a lower point. One by one the most difficult points were passed, the last turn rounded, and the river lay only fifty feet below them. This was the last possible resting-place. The brawny "boys" grasped the rope, the "old man" began cautiously knocking away the rocks with which the wheels were blocked.

At that moment there sounded the thrilling *skir-r* of the dreaded rattlesnake, seemingly from beneath the very feet of Grey. Instinctively he sprang aside, only to see the spotted reptile strike its poison-laden fangs into the flank of his near ox. With a bellow of terror, the ox lurched to one side. The wrench caused one hind wheel to slip from the restraining boulder—and then the lumbering wagon plunged down the slope with irresistible force, scattering those grasping the rope in every direction as the rough line tore through their bleeding fingers.

Down like a shot—down the steep incline and over the scant level space, plunging into the stream and vanishing amid the cloud of spray and water drops; in one brief instant of time all was over.

For a minute Jonathan Grey stood like one petrified at the sight of the wreck and ruin before him. Even at that distance he could see that the cattle were both dead or crippled beyond the power of motion. The stout yoke had held them beyond all hope of escape. The heavy

wagon had hurled them headlong into the stream. The stout tongue snapped like a pipe-stem. The whole weight of wagon and contents descended full upon the oxen, then turned over and lodged, a complete wreck, against a shoal near the further side of the stream.

Just then the plain, common sense of the elder Mrs. Grey showed itself, as she scrambled down the slope, crying:

"The tea an' sugar an' salt 'll all spile—do rouse up an' do somethin', Jon'than!"

Tucking up her skirts, the old lady boldly entered the stream—at no point waist deep near the wagon—followed by her husband, who seemed completely dazed by the unfortunate accident. But this sort of stupor was not of long duration. A sharp, yet almost choking cry parted his lips, as he leaned heavily upon his wife's shoulder, pointing with trembling finger toward the front wheel, which lay uppermost, just above the ripping water.

"Look at that—look thar! do you see it, Jerushy? 'Sh—'sh! don't speak—you'll skeer it away!"

Upon the wheel, wedged between two of the spokes, lay a dull yellow lump, fully as large as the clenched fist of a grown man, dragged from its resting-place beneath the waves by the wheel as the wagon turned end over end. A wonderful mass of that metal for which the dazed beholders had broken up their old home, had parted from friends and kindred to brave the dangers of an unknown land through many months of painful plodding; a precious mass such as the old man had often dreamed of finding—and now that it lay before him, almost within arm's length, he feared to move, after the first startled whisper, fairly holding his breath lest the wonderful nugget should take to itself wings and vanish from his sight forever.

A splash in the water behind him startled Jonathan Grey, and turning, he saw several men hastening toward him. With a hoarse, inarticulate cry he sprang forward and clutched the yellow mass to his breast with both hands, turning around with the look of one standing at bay, for the moment unable to recognize his own sons.

"He's gone crazy—clean crazy over a yaller stun!" gasped Mrs. Grey, shrinking behind her stalwart sons.

"Crazy!" echoed the old man, with a shrill laugh as he held aloft the lump of gold; "does that look like I was crazy, boys? Look at that—gold—pure gold! No—hands off—what do you know 'bout sech things? You'd lose it amongst ye, an' then I would go crazy. I'll take keer o' this—you help the old woman git out what things she wants; I can't fool with sech trifles now."

The old man waded across the stream without further thought of his household goods, and only for Mrs. Grey's anxiety concerning her tea, the rippling water would have been unchecked in its work of destruction, so highly were the young men wrought up by the wonderful discovery of gold.

Jonathan Grey crouched in a heap upon the grassy bank, gloating on the precious lump nestling in his broad, quivering palms. So intent was he upon his treasure, that the sound of hoof-strokes, muffled as they were by the thick carpet of grass, failed to break his contemplation until the riders checked their animals close beside him. Not until then did the gold-worshiper raise his eyes.

"Good-day, senor—" began the eldest rider, in a courteous tone, but then abruptly paused, his eager gaze riveted upon the nugget of gold.

One far less jealous of his newly-discovered fortune than Jonathan Grey could have read that fixed gaze, covetous and longing. And as he read it, his look of surprise changed to one of stubborn defiance as he arose, putting his gold behind him, his massive, leonine head reaching nearly level with the Californian's shoulders, mounted though he was.

The trio formed a picture not unworthy mention. The emigrant, despite his rude attire, his weather-beaten and begrimed features, was a remarkable specimen of physical perfection, if not masculine beauty. In stature several inches above six feet, a life of hard work had fully developed a gigantic frame, nourished on "hog-meat and hominy." His features were clear-cut and stern, intensified by the piercing eyes which glittered from beneath the heavy eyebrows. His dark iron-gray hair, long and slightly curling, now tossed back from his brow, gave him a leonine look that alone would have cowed an ordinary man.

The Californian was of middle hight, though remarkably broad across the shoulders. His limbs were thick and short, and at every motion the ridges and folds of steel-like muscles plainly showed their workings through his suit of light blue broad-cloth. His features were harsh, yet not unhandsome, though plainly those of one who would balk at nothing to accomplish his ends.

The second rider, though dressed in a semi-masculine style, and seated in a wholly masculine manner, astride, was a young woman, lovely as an angel of light, despite an unmistakable resemblance in face to the man beside whom she rode. Her figure was admirably developed—if

anything, a thought too voluptuously. There is little use in attempting a minute description of her face. How often have you met a pen-portrait of a woman's face that was fully satisfactory—or even that gave you a faint idea of that woman's charms? Enough that the woman in question was a pure brunette, with the eyes and hair of a Spanish woman, the figure of a Venus, the carriage of an Amazon.

"Where did you find that gold?" slowly demanded the Californian, after a brief pause. "I see. It is still wet. You found it here—on my land—it is my property."

"I want to know!" sneered Grey, once more his usual self. "You knowed all about it, I s'pose. This is your private bank, I shouldn't wonder. You must be 'tarnal rich to leave sech lumps o' gold layin' round loose fer the fust traveler to pick up."

"I am rich enough and powerful enough to claim and take possession of my own whenever and wherever I see it," retorted the Californian, sharply.

"That's no more'n right. It's a way I have myself. When my fingers shet themselves onto a thing, it's thar; an' when a man tries to blow or gouge me out o' anything, that man'd better git measured for his coffin aforehand, ef he's anyways pertic'lar 'bout the fit of it—you hear me!"

"Bah! do you take me for a chicken? I've fleshed my spurs in many a bigger and better man than you dare claim to be. There is no need for idle blustering. The whole matter may be put in a nut-shell. This is my property, secured by papers, legally made out. Those ridges, this valley—all are mine; all that grows upon it belongs to me. If you found that gold here, that is mine—and whatever is mine I will claim and take possession of wherever I may find it."

"What's the row, pap?" demanded one of the "boys," attracted by the stern tones of the Californian.

"Nothin'—only this dandified critter sais as how all the gold we find belongs to him, an' ef we don't give it up peaceably, why he'll just take it anyhow," and Jonathan Grey laughed harshly.

"Them's monstrous big words when you speak 'em to us, stranger," said Jotham, turning toward the frowning horseman. "I reckon you'll hev to say 'em over ag'in afore we kin come to onderstan' ye. Look yere, pap—shell I bounce him? Jest say the word—"

"You take this nugget, Jotham, an' never mind when it ain't your put-in. I reckon I'm hoss enough fer this job, myself. Take the gold an' hold it safe. Now, stranger, you've hear'n my say-so; what you goin' to do 'bout it?"

"You persist in refusing to give up my property?"

"Findens keepsens. That word's never truer than about gold. That can't be owned by nobody afore it's found; an' when it's found, it belongs to the fust pocket it goes into. I found this nugget, tharefo' it's mine. Ef you want it, you've got to fight fer it—an' then you sha'n't hev it."

"Fight for it I will, if you are fool enough to make fighting necessary. But if you are not utterly crazy, you will think twice before you oblige me to take such a step. Look! it was easy to start your wagon down yonder hill, but could you stop it? There it lies, a complete ruin. When it was in full motion, you would have called any man a lunatic who tried to stop its course by throwing himself in front of the wheels; yet you threaten to act even more foolishly, in defying me, and attempting to rob me of my own. Dare but try it, and I will crush you as easily and more surely than that wagon could have done."

"Ef you're hafe as hefty on the do as you be on the talk, then I be the fool you say. But I've hear'n sheep bl'at afore now. Look here! I'm a man—as you claim to be one. Ef you ain't lyin' we kin settle this matter right now. Though the gold is mine, I'll fight you fer it, man to man, the best to take the gold an' say no more about it."

The Californian dropped his reins and seemed about to dismount, when the young woman, who, until now, had watched the dispute in silence, grasped his arm and uttered several words in Spanish. The man smiled grimly and released his bridle-reins, saying:

"And when I had conquered you, how long would it be before I would be down with a bullet or knife in my back from one of your hopeful cubs yonder?"

"We're white men," hoarsely uttered Grey, his eyes glowing. "We're white men, an' you take us fer cowardly greasers! I've offered you a fa'r shake, though you lie in claimin' this chunk o' gold. I offered to fight you, fa'r fist or with any kind o' weapons you choosed, an' you tuck water. Now git—puckachee while you kin. It makes me sick to look on a grow'd-up coward—"

"That's enough. You have uttered your death-warrant, old man. If I was alone now—only for this lady—I would make you eat those words, though there were fifty men at your back. I will go—but you may look for me again. Come, Inez, anda—anda!"

As they turned and rode swiftly away, Jotham Grey laughed loudly and derisively.

"A-hidin' behind a gal's petticoat, for all his big talk!"

"I ain't so sure o' that," slowly replied the patriarch. "He's no coward, as my eyes see. Ef it hedn't bin fer the gal, he'd a-bounced me jest then. I'd 'a' quieted him, shore; but he'd 'a' made it interestin' fer a bit. No, no, boy—we ain't see'd the end o' this, yit. He'll come back, an' more 'long 'o him. We're bound to see trouble afore this blows over."

"But you won't give in—you won't give up this beauty, pap?" and Jotham fondled the golden nugget.

"Don't be a fool, boy! They ain't men enough in ten counties to make me do that. But thar—le's git to work. Fust thing's to git out the plunder an' what's left o' the old wagon. I ondy wish I hed a thousan' ov 'em to mash up at the same price."

"They must be more whar that come from—don't you think, pap?"

"Sart'in to be; an' we'll make a clean sweep afore we pull up stakes, though all the greasers this side o' monkey-heaven bl'ated at us. Slump in, now, an' git to work."

The six men, but one of them under six feet in height, and he made up in breadth what he lacked in height, made short work of it, passing the contents of the wagon to dry land, then righting the vehicle, and, aided by the remaining yoke of cattle, dragging it to land. The two younger women were carried across, with the children. Two hours later the emigrants had pitched their camp, choosing a spot where a point of land extended some yards into the little lake, where a surprise would be almost impossible, and where they could make a good fight in case of necessity.

"Do you think there will be any fighting, Eben?" asked the younger woman, Minnie Brady, a niece of Grey's—a fair-haired, blue-eyed lassie, the pride and pet of the family.

"I don't think—but you wouldn't be afeard, little one. They can't no harm come to you, anyway."

Quieted, if not convinced, Minnie turned away to assist her aunt in preparing supper. Meanwhile Jonathan Grey did not neglect any precaution. Every tree and shrub within rifle-shot was cut down and cleared away. Every hollow and point where a foe might possibly lie hidden was carefully marked. With a final glance around to see that nothing had been neglected, he answered the call to supper.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF A NUGGET.

"HIS! Eben—'tis only I—Minnie," whispered a soft voice as the young sentinel turned swiftly around at catching the sound of her light foot-fall.

"You here, little pet! I thought you fast asleep, long ago, as you should be, 'stead o' out here this time o' night."

Though the words were chiding, the tone was not, and with a little, half-bashful laugh, the girl yielded to the strong arm that drew her close to his side.

"I couldn't sleep—though I tried hard, Eben. I kept thinking and seeing such strange things in the dark. And the air seemed to choke me—oh! Eben, dear, I wish we were well away from this dreadful place—if we had only taken the other trail—"

"An' so missed that blessed nugget o' gold? No, no, pet. That is a foolish wish in you—mighty foolish, I must say, to wish us sech hard luck as that."

"It will be worse luck if we stay—I feel it, Eben—something tells me that there is a great and heavy trouble coming upon us. I have had such dreams and seen such sights—"

"Thar, birdy—don't think no more about these things. It's jest 'cause you got so 'cited back yender, an' when day comes you'll be the fust one to laugh at all sech ideas. Why, Minnie, think what we've come all this way fer; an' now that it's right aneath our han's wouldn't we be monstrous fools not to stoop down an' pick it up? An' then—think what it'll be to you 'nd me, birdy," he added, his voice sinking lower, his arm contracting, until the little figure was pressed closely to his side, until the golden-haired head rested confidently upon his breast. "Think how happy we will be, back to the old place—in a nice little house of our own—oh! my God! they've murdered me!"

The moon was hidden behind a cloud. The stars cast a faint, uncertain light over the valley, twinkling down through the rifts. The keenest eye could not recognize a human figure fifty yards away, with the dark hills for a background. And yet, at twice that distance the stalwart figure of Eben Grey had been noticed and marked down for the first victim. Standing erect, the figures of the lovers were clearly outlined against the glossy surface of the lake, little dreaming of the cruel fate approaching.

Gliding nearer, foot by foot, silent and crafty as a veritable serpent, the detailed assassin reached his chosen position without arousing the suspicions of the lovers. Coolly and steadily as though aiming at a grazing deer, his weapon rose from his cheek, and for an instant remained

at a level, steady and remorseless as fate; then exploded. Poor Eben Grey staggered back, quivering all over like one suddenly smitten with the ague, then sunk to the ground despite the clinging arms of his loved one, the bosom of whose dress was besprinkled with his heart's blood.

One moment all so quiet, so peaceful; the next a wild pandemonium.

From the grass belt came a wild cheer; from the little encampment loud cries and shouts, the latter defiant and fierce as those they echoed back. Crack—crack—a dropping fire from the grass; crack—crack—a swift and resolute answer from the thoroughly-awakened defenders. For a moment there was a hasty trampling of feet as the comrades of the assassin charged, and for the moment it seemed as though they were resolved to end all at one furious, downright blow; but high above the rapid detonations of pistols and rifles, arose the horrible, blood-curdling yell of bitter agony, as one, two of their number fell to the ground, writhing and moaning in the relentless grasp of death. The survivors faltered, then paused, finally sinking down and burrowing into the luxuriant grass.

This swift retribution awed them. They could not understand such a sudden and complete recovery from surprise. The sentinel shot down, they believed the worst half of their work accomplished; one resolute rush would end the job. They had reasoned as though dealing with their own countrymen, and in this lay their great error.

At the first alarm Jonathan Grey and his sturdy sons sprang to their feet, rifles in hand, their eyes keen, heads clear and hands ready for hot work. One glimpse of the shadowy figures rushing toward them was enough. As many a true marksman can, when thoroughly knowing his weapon, plant bullet after bullet within a hand's breath without using either sight, so with them. One discharge from their rifles that told heavily, then dropping the empty weapons and drawing revolvers, they charged the enemy with more courage than discretion. Fortunately their purpose was frustrated, in time.

For an instant Minnie Brady was awe-stricken, but then as she felt the hot life-blood of her lover moistening her hands, a sharp, agonized shriek broke from her lips, and she stooped over the stricken sentinel, weeping and moaning like one distraught.

Recognizing her voice, Jonathan Grey called to his boys, and between them they carried the two lovers back to the wagon. They dare not strike a light by which to examine Eben's wounds. They placed him in his mother's hands, then, with reloaded rifles, crouched low down around their camp, awaiting the further movements of their enemies. A weary, weary vigil was theirs. The knowledge that a bitter, vindictive foe was skulking near, shielded by the gloom, waiting but a favorable opportunity for striking a deadly blow at their lives; while the faint, restless moaning of their son and brother, unconsciously wrestling with death, came to their ears with terrible distinctness.

And so the minutes slowly crept on, each hour seeming like a life-time with that terribly significant moaning sound ringing in their ears. Hour after hour until the stars slowly paled before the coming of dawn, until the black shadows turned gray, and the suspicious phantoms of the night gradually resolved themselves into homeless shrubs or unoffending clumps of grass, they waited and watched with painfully strained vision, fearing to speak, to move a limb lest it should draw forth a fatal shot from ambush. Foot by foot their circle of vision widened. Foot by foot they keenly scrutinized the ground with sharpened vision that could almost number the blades of grass; but all seemed peaceful as it was quiet. No enemy was in sight. Had they fled, with the first repulse? So it seemed.

With a hoarse cry, Jonathan Grey sprang to his feet, his huge figure drawn erect as though defying death. Anything was better than this heart-crushing suspense.

"You kin come out, boys," he said, after a long, searching glare around the camp. "The cowardly sneaks hev gone. They dassent face a man in open day. You boys go take a look around; but don't go too nigh to them timber patches afore you scout around 'em."

As the young men crept away on their mission, the patriarch slowly approached the wagon. Inside it, guarded by a couple of blankets, lay the wounded youth. At his side crouched the mother, pale, hollow-eyed and haggard from her weary vigil. Minnie had sobbed herself to sleep.

A startling change had come over the young man. His full, florid face had bleached and fallen away, looking like one who had endured a long spell of illness. His eyes, strangely sunken, were half-open, though he slept, or lay in a stupor resembling sleep. A crimsoned cloth was bound upon his breast. Two inches more to the left and the bullet would have reached his heart—only through the brain of his betrothed.

In silence Jonathan Grey gazed upon the sadly changed face of his dearly-loved, his youngest born. A long life of adventurous experience had taught him many a bit of wisdom, and among them knowledge of death. He knew

that it lay before him now, that already one precious life had been demanded as the price of that nugget of gold which he had sworn to defend with the last drop of his heart's blood.

"I'm afeardso, Jerushy," he said, slowly shaking his head as he caught the wistful, imploring glance. "It's mighty hard, but you must b'ar up under it as best ye kin. It shell cost them dear—the cowardly hell-hounds!"

"Will that bring him back? my pet—my poor boy!"

"It'll be revenge, an'—an' he'll sleep the better for 't," muttered Jonathan, turning aside, ashamed to show the emotion that tugged at his heart-strings.

"They've gone," muttered Jotham, as he returned from his scout. "We've salivated two on 'em. I saw whar they fell, an' the marks whar they was drug away. I don't reckon they'll want to trouble us ag'in very soon."

"It'd be dear work even ef we'd wiped out twenty o' the devils, 'stead o' two," gloomily responded Jonathan.

"Tain't so bad, is it?" faltered Jotham, while the anxious eyes of Loammi, Malachi and Zabdial reiterated the question.

"It couldn't well be wuss. Wait—he's sleepin', now. He'll wake up soon—fer long enough, mebbe, to say good-by. Go you, Jotham, an' roust out Alviry; we must eat while we kin, to be ready fer them hell-hounds when they come ag'in."

With weapons lying across their laps, the five men ate their humble meal in silence, a cloud over every face, a heavy weight upon every heart. Then Jonathan carried food to his wife, bidding her eat. She swallowed a few morsels, but then her will failed.

"I can't, father—I can't eat, an' him a-layin' here—dyin' afore my eyes. Don't ax me, father—it's like swallerin' my own heart!" she faltered, with an appealing look.

With a sudden impulse the hard old man stooped and kissed her wrinkled forehead, then turned hastily away, man-like, fearing to look upon her wan face, lest he should utterly break down and shame his manhood by easing the crushing load at his heart with womanly tears. He lighted his pipe and sat down beside the water thinking—dark and gloomy thoughts they were. He was waiting—waiting for the coming of death; nor did he move a muscle until the glad cry of his wife startled him.

"My boy—my darling boy!"

Eben opened his eyes and sought to arise, but he was too feeble even to lift his head. With a pang that tore her very heart, the mother read his meaning, and called Minnie. She was only second in his heart now, and he dying.

"Don't cry, birdy," faintly whispered Eben, his sunken features lighting up with a glow of love as the weeping maid knelt beside him. "Thar never was a man worth one tear from your bonny blue eyes—much less me. Don't cry—mebbe it's better so," he whispered, softly caressing the golden head.

"Ah! Eben—my love—let me go with you. I don't want to live, and you—you—dead!"

"No, birdy; you'll live—for some better man than me. You know what—we was talkin' of—last night. It was too bright to last. I see it all, now. You mustn't fret—"

Here his speech was broken by a fit of coughing as the clotted blood rose in his throat. By signs, rather than words, he expressed a wish to say good-by to all. One by one the brothers came and gently touched his hand, but not one could utter the words they wished. They were gazing upon death, and it awed them.

"Now, father—one word," whispered Eben, as the patriarch knelt beside him. "Take care of her—love her dearly, for my sake. And father—you won't be driv' away from here? Hold on to your luck—don't let 'em make—you—take water!"

This effort exhausted him, and he lay for some minutes like one already dead, his wasted hand and Minnie's clasped in his. Only the painfully suppressed sobs of the women were audible. It was a weirdly impressive scene.

Suddenly the dying man roused, his eyes opened, bright and flashing, his face lighted up with a wonderful smile. But it was the last flash of the expiring lamp. His rigid limbs suddenly relaxed, the bright smile faded. For one moment there was a breathless pause, broken by one agonizing wail:

"Dead—dead! God, in mercy give back my pore boy!"

CHAPTER IV.

A FRUITLESS MISSION.

"I SAY, pap, thar's some sort o' critter out yender, cluss to that lop-sided live-oak," cried Loammi, turning his head eagerly toward the spot where the patriarch sat over his pipe. "It's a long shot, but I reckon I kin tickle it from yere—"

Jonathan Grey arose and approached the young man. He gazed long and keenly toward the tree indicated, but the suspicious object was no longer to be seen. He once more resumed his position, smoking rapidly, like one who is fighting against dark and bitter thoughts.

By the sun it was nearly noon. Twice had the boys cautiously scouted through the little

valley, but without result. The bloody trail had led them for a short distance, then vanished completely. Seemingly the midnight foes had abandoned the contest as useless. So at least the younger men reasoned. Not so Jonathan Grey. He better realized the power and temptation of gold. Only for that luckless meeting, when he was dazed with the nugget of gold, only for that, his youngest born might now be alive and well, instead of a cold and senseless lump of clay.

Before him he could see his dead. His wife and Alvira, his daughter-in-law, Jotham's wife, were preparing the corpse for burial. And Minnie—she lay upon a blanket, beneath the wagon; exhausted, she had sobbed herself to sleep. He could read the agonized changes of her wan countenance, could hear the low, broken gasps and sobs. His hard eyes dimmed, and he turned his head hastily aside with a low, choking growl. Then, with a muttered oath, he dashed his comfortless pipe to the ground, and strode out to where his sons were moodily keeping watch.

"Do you reckon thar's more sech lumps o' gold over yender?" at length ventured Zabdriel.

"Don't talk o' sech things, afore he's cold," sternly uttered the patriarch, with a fiery glance.

"Don't look at me like that, pap. I cain't help it. I must talk 'bout somethin'—ef it keeps on like this I'll go plum crazy. I kin hear his voice in my ears the hull time; an' ef I shet my eyes to hide it, thar he lays, all bleedin', dyin'! Lord God, ef I could only do somethin'—" and he drove his clenched fist fiercely into the soft earth beside him.

The old man was silenced by this passionate outburst; it was so thoroughly akin to his own emotions. The other crouched in moody silence.

A single man suddenly stepped out from the friendly cover of the live-oak, and strode rapidly toward the little camp. For several moments he was unobserved, but then the dry, blood-shot eyes of Zabdriel rested upon him. With a hoarse, inarticulate snarl he sprang erect and leveled his rifle.

Jonathan Grey was startled by the movement, and glanced in the direction indicated. He cried sharply to Zabdriel, but the words were unheeded, and he had just time to knock the loaded weapon down when it exploded, sending its contents deep into the earth before them.

"Be you blind, boy?" angrily cried the patriarch, as Zabdriel turned upon him, fiercely.

"Cain't you see that he's got a flag?"

"He's one o' them as killed Eben!"

"Mebbe so. That's no sign we need play the nigger. A white man's bound to respect a white flag, even if it's carried by a dozen murderers. But that's no sign he's to git cl'ar off. Mind, you're not to move unless you git the word or sign from me."

As Zabdriel sprang up in full view, the man, who did indeed bear a flag of truce, in a white rag tied to a shortstick, paused abruptly, though making no effort to seek cover. And while the five men were consulting, as it seemed to him, he stood quietly awaiting the result. If one of the assassins, he was at least no coward.

The patriarch strode forward a few paces, and called aloud:

"Who are ye, an' what ye want, anyhow?"

"I wish to hold a consultation with the leader of your party. As to who I am—I am too much of a gentleman to fire upon an unarmed man, and he the bearer of a flag of truce," came the prompt reply.

"Don't make me sorry I saved your life from the bullet of a brave, hot-headed boy," sternly replied Grey. "Keep a short tongue in your head an' you're safe enough, long es you kerry that bit o' rag. Spit out what you've got to say, and make it short. We ain't none o' us in the best o' humors fer passin' compliments."

"What I have to say can be spoken quite as well at closer quarters. I do not care to strain my voice unnecessarily. Will you come out, or shall I visit you there?"

"You kin come in. I don't go a step out o' my way fer a inemy, unless it's with weapons in han'."

The flag-bearer coolly advanced and confronted the scowling quintette, leisurely rolling up a cigarette. They recognized in him the Californian who had so sharply accosted them on the preceding day, but there was a wonderful change in his demeanor from then, as he politely asked Jotham to oblige him with a light.

"All the fire you and your cussed tribe'll ever git from me, 'll come out o' this!" fiercely repeated Jotham, tapping his rifle sharply.

"We ain't the men to talk soft with our tongues, when our teeth is aching to bite, stranger," quietly interposed Jonathan. "Say your say, an' hev done with it."

"A cur will remain a cur, though you set him up on two legs and place a rifle in his hands," coolly retorted the Californian, with a steely glitter in his black eyes. "But I will be as short as you wish, since you cannot comprehend common politeness. Listen, then. You are trespassers here. This is my land, far as the eye can reach. I warned you yesterday, and you laughed at me. You refused to restore to me my own property. I come over, bringing

my papers as proof of my claims. That is sufficient for honest men. If you refuse to depart quietly—I am willing you should keep all the gold you have found thus far, rather than to engage in a squabble over it; if, as I said, you agree to depart quietly, all will be well, but if you persist in refusing, then you shall be made to go—that is, such of you as are able to travel after being convinced that you are in error."

"Air you through?" quietly asked the patriarch.

"Until I receive your answer—yes."

"Good enough. I cain't talk quite so slick an' high-soundin' es you, but I kin say jest as much an' that in a durned sight shorter time. As fer your papers, I don't val'ie them a continental cuss. Finders keepers whar gold is consarned. As fer drivin' us off, you tried that on last night."

"Pardon, friend," interrupted the Californian; "you are in error. I was not here last night; had I been, there would have been no need of this interview, for you would have been past all earthly arguments. I never strike twice at the same object."

"You never will at me," laughed Jonathan, sharply. "You ax me to leave this place. Waal, I will, if he sais so."

"He! whom do you mean?"

Grey smiled quietly, and motioned the flag-bearer to follow him. He passed around the shattered wagon and stood beside his dead boy.

"Thar is what I mean," said Grey, hoarsely, a red glare in his eyes. "That's my youngest boy, the pet of his mother. His voice is the one as kin talk me into leavin' this place. Kin you talk him over, think?"

"He is beyond the reach of our voices," calmly replied the Californian. "But what remains should speak the more strong to you. You have other sons, why thrust the same fate upon them? You cannot hope to fight me successfully. Remember how he died."

"I will—ef ever I fergit it may the Eternal strike me down to never-endin' torment! Stranger, I hev sworn by all that men hold holy to never give over ontel I've avinged him—ontel the last one o' his cowardly murderers is dead an' scorchin' in—!"

"Madam," said the flag-bearer, turning abruptly to Mrs. Grey, "you at least will listen to reason. Persuade your husband to abandon such a hopeless struggle—"

"Ef he turned back now, I would curse him with my last breath!" fiercely exclaimed the haggard woman. "Stranger, I begged him to leave this place: I almost prayed to him to leave, afore—he—my pet, my darlin' boy! was killed. But now—old an' worn out woman as I be—ef he held back his hand from the plow, I'd take the trail myself, but that those coward murderers should pay fer the dear blood they hev shed. Go, now—go your way, an' ef his blood is on your hands hide your head in the middle of the airth that you may hev time to repent afore the debt of vengeance is asked of ye!"

The Californian slowly turned away, followed by Jonathan.

"I have done my best," he said, coldly. "You refuse my warning. You will never have another chance. I give you two hours. After that I shall kill you—wipe you from off the face of the earth!"

"Thar—don't say any more," hoarsely muttered Jonathan, his eyes glaring, his fingers working convulsively. "Go while you kin, afore you make me forgit what you kerry. Go, I tell you! Thar's blood in my eyes—go!"

With a laugh the Californian turned his back and leisurely paced away never once turning his head to glance back at the enemies he was trusting so far. He knew his men.

"Now boys, to work!" cried Grey, as the flag-bearer disappeared beneath the wood. "Two o' you go an' throw up a bank o' dirt fer the wimmen to lay ahind; the rest help me out yere. Lively, now!"

Pickax and shovel were plied briskly for an hour or more without interruption, and at the end of that time a crescent-shaped pit some twenty feet from the wagon, and reaching from water to water was completed. The pit itself was two feet in depth, with all the earth removed banked up on its outer edge, thus affording a complete cover for riflemen, and all this was completed without interruption from without.

But the truce was not to be of much longer duration, and the gold-seekers were speedily convinced that the Californian was terribly earnest in his threats.

A dozen horsemen were discovered filing through the pass, pausing first beyond the live-oak tree, of which mention has already been made. Their movements were earnestly watched by the emigrants, nor was it long ere they divined the agreed-upon mode of attack.

"It's Injun fashion," muttered Jonathan, as the horsemen sprang off one by one. "You've hearn me tell how it works, boys, so take it cool. Don't nobody fire ontel I call his name. They want to draw our fire, then they'll charge in. Aim fer thar critters, ef you cain't git a good chance at themselves. Ready now, Jotham!"

In single file the riders came dashing past, but

not until the third round did they come close enough for steady work, though each rider had discharged his weapon in passing.

"Hold your fire, boys!" muttered Jonathan, his eyes on fire. "I'll set you the zample myself. They're comin' in cluss enough this round."

On came the bold riders, the first two firing from beneath their animals' necks as they passed at full speed; but Grey had long since picked out his victim, and paid them no attention. On he came—hidden behind a magnificent buckskin; the rifle cracked—the horse plunged headlong to earth, crushing its rider beneath its body.

As though this shot had been the signal, a loud cheer arose from the plain, and nearly a dozen stout, armed men dashed toward the breastwork, almost reaching it before the startled defenders could realize their danger.

The circling horsemen had been a cunning ruse to conceal the real attack, for, while they riveted the attention of the emigrants, the Californian led a dozen picked men, crawling through the grass, hidden by the line of fresh earth.

Up rose the defenders, plying their rifles and pistols with wonderful rapidity, until the foe was fairly within arm's-length; and then ensued a terrific struggle—more like a duel of infuriated wild beasts than of human beings—a duel to the bitter death!

CHAPTER V.

TIMELY AID.

"I KNEWED it! Didn't I tell ye? Didn't I say both o' them fellers is pesky, double-faced sneaks, cavortin' aroun' to see what honest fools they could pick up? Didn't I warn ye—sa-ay?" bawled Grumbling Dick, as the clatter of hoofs died away in the distance.

"Divel a warn did ye warn anny wan o' us that I hearn," sputtered Jem Daly. "It's a mane way ye've got, ye long-legged gorsoon, a-t'rowin' the blame on other poor divels' shoulders whenever annything goes wrong, so 'tis!"

"Easy, boys!" cried Ned Allen, sharply. "There's no use in squabbling over what can't be helped. Where all are to blame, it's nobody's fault in particular. It will be a lesson to me not to trust every prowling vagabond as a friend and brother."

"I s'pose we're to jist set down quietly an' let 'em kerry off our critters, without so much as stretchin' out a finger to hinder 'em, ain't we?"

"Not quite so bad; but what are we to do, until daylight? There's two men against us, certainly, and nobody knows how many more. We don't know anything of the lay of the country. What is easier for them than to lead us into a trap, out of which we would be lucky to escape with no more than the loss of what little dust we have managed to pick up?"

"Cap is right, boys," said Harry Lane, whose general taciturnity only rendered his words the more impressive when he did speak. "We must wait for day-dawn."

The party was not a very cheerful one, as they sat in the gloom, waiting for dawn with the best patience they could summon. The blow dealt them was a severe one. Every hoof—over a dozen head of good, stout mules—had been stolen, and they were left afoot, with all their stores and tools, which must be abandoned or "backed" wherever they went.

A word of explanation may not be amiss here, since, as doubtless the reader is aware, it was a very unusual thing for a party of prospectors to pursue their calling with such a cavalcade.

Nearly a month previously, while toiling over the north fork of Feather river, Ned Allen, at some little risk to himself, rescued a wandering Chinook Indian from the rough mercies of some drunken diggers. The Chinook seemed grateful, and gave Allen full directions by which he might find a land where gold lay in nuggets like the gravel along a mountain brook. His words were greedily drunken in, for in those days of marvelous discoveries no tale was too extravagant for belief. Allen extracted all the information possible, and then called together all those who had journeyed with him from his far Eastern home, when the golden tidings flashed through the land. Binding them to secrecy, he unfolded his plan, finding no difficulty in inducing them to join him. For several days they labored on, listlessly, as though losing heart, and then declared openly that, disgusted, they were going home. It was no hard matter for them to purchase mules and an abundance of provisions, and finally they started along the back trail. As Allen shrewdly suspected, they were allowed for a considerable distance to pursue their speculators, who fancied there was more in the wind than appeared upon the surface; but at length even the most pertacious was shaken off. Not until then did the party of emigrants turn their faces toward the wonderful "golden valley." Thus far had they proceeded, and in one time had believed the valley where the chronicle opened to be the one described by the Chinook, until a pretty thorough search had revealed them of their error. The object in starting out so well supplied was, first, to deceive the diggers into believing that they were indeed making for home by the overland route; second, to carry to the place a quantity of provisions sufficient for

several months, so there would be no need of visiting any mining camp for supplies, and thus run the risk of being followed and having their secret "blown" before their fortunes were made.

With the first dawn of light, the prospecters were up and at work. During the night they had securely cached their pack-saddles, tools, and all provisions, save a small supply for each man. Thus there was no time lost when the moment came for setting to work. And five minutes later a sharp cry from Harry Lane drew the rest around him.

"Look! Blood—and plenty of it!" he muttered, pointing to the rocks. "Whoever fired that shot last night didn't waste his lead!"

Puzzled glances were interchanged. Not one of those present had discharged the shot. It must have been one of the two missing men; but for what, since they were evidently acting in concert?

"There's more in this than we can see," said Allen, frowningly. "But on—let's see what this trail leads to."

They were not kept long in doubt. The line of blood-drops was followed for nearly a quarter mile, then ended close beside a deep ravine, along the bottom of which skulked a grizzled wolf, licking its chops and howling lugubriously. The bushes and vines along the side of the river were crushed and broken, as though some heavy body had fallen down from point to point. Without a word, Allen laid aside his weapon and grasping a wild grape-vine, dexterously swung himself into the ravine. A few moments later he reappeared, and stood upon the trail again.

"Just as I thought!" he panted. "The trail ends here. One of our mules lies yonder, a bullet-hole in its haunches and its throat cut!"

"The uncivilized varmints did it to hide thar trail," interposed Will Ambrose.

"Yes; these blood-marks were about our only chance. A hound could scarcely follow a trail through these rocky hills and passes, and we are none of us much to brag of in that line. I'm afraid the jig's up, boys."

"You ain't a-goin' to tail off this soon, without even one try fer it, be ye?" exclaimed Mat. Goodheart.

"No. I'll stick to it long as any one wishes, but, to my thinking, we're out of our depth here. It's no new hand that put up this job. It's more like the long-winded yarns they used to tell of Fiery Fred, down Sacramento way."

"Mebbe 'tis him, changed his beat. It'd be jist our crooked luck," muttered Grumbling Dick.

"No, he's rubbed out. But that don't matter. Somebody has robbed us—that's plain; and I go for getting even, if we can. Scatter out and see which has got the best eye for a trail; but keep within easy reach of one another."

By dint of hard and painstaking effort, the trail was followed for full two miles, but then it was irrecoverably lost to the prospecters, though they doggedly persisted in the vain quest long after all hope had vanished.

But then there came to their ears a startling sound that, for the moment, banished all thoughts of the lost trail from their minds; the sound of rapid firing, roaring above the rocky ridge that rose upon their left. As with one impulse, every man scrambled forward, eager to discover the meaning of the fusillade.

A peculiar scene met their gaze as they paused upon the rocky crest. A beautiful valley lay at their feet, a rippling stream, a placid lake. A battered wagon standing close beside the water. A dozen horsemen spurring swiftly in a large crescent, discharging their weapons while at full speed, showing but a hand or a spurred heel, toward the five dark figures that lay motionless in the narrow trench before the wagon, though their entire bodies were exposed to the view of the prospecters from their look-out.

"Injuns! I knowed it! I tole you so!" spluttered Barnes.

"No—look at their clothes," hastily muttered Allen. "Road-agents, more likely. And look! see those fellows creeping up through the grass! Great heavens! why don't those stupid fellows in the trench shoot?"

"Don't see 'em—that's why," said Lane. "There'll be bloody murder if we don't interfere. Come on, boys!" and without waiting to see how his appeal was answered, he dashed recklessly down the precipitous slope, revolver in hand.

At nearly the same instant there came a single shot from the trench; and then the ambushed men sprung forward with wild yells, firing as they ran, while their comrades on horseback wheeled and swiftly joined the charge.

By the time the prospecters reached the level, the rival parties had joined together in one terrific, hand-to-hand combat over the shallow trench. Already several men were down, and blood was flowing freely from others who were too intensely excited to feel their wounds. There was no thought of asking or giving quarter. They fought like madmen, like infuriated wild beasts, their eyes flashing fire, their teeth grating ferociously, their curling lips fairly dropping froth.

In the wild, delirious excitement of the

moment, Ned Allen could not check the cry of wondering admiration that rose to his lips as he saw one herculean figure tower above the rest, with hair floating free like the tangled mane of a lion, while stout men were hurled from his path like broken reeds before the fierce blasts of a mountain gale.

Then—the massive arms were flung aloft—the tower-like figure swayed to one side, then plunged heavily forward. But even as he fell, the giant grappled blindly with the man whose hand had lain him low.

There was a blood-red glare before his eyes as the young miner leaped forward, his shrill yell keeping time with his rapidly detonating revolver, and the next instant he found himself swallowed up in the *melee*.

The next few moments ever after appeared to him like some horrible nightmare, confused and indistinct in details, though, as a whole, sickening and repulsive. He found himself rising from the ground, from the body of what had once been a man, whose skull was beaten in, whose blood now deeply dyed his hands.

"I knowed it—I tole ye how 'twould be, but you wouldn't listen to me!" sounded a familiar voice in his ears, and brushing the mists from his eyes, Allen saw Grumbling Dick seated upon a gayly-dressed body, nursing his left hand, from which the blood was streaming freely. "Won't I look nice tryin' to han'le pick, shovel or pan? A finger bit clean off—but I'll pound—"

"Don't—he's dead!" cried Lane, catching the huge fist. "You've killed the poor devil."

"My luck ag'in! I wanted to lick the dog-goned imp clean out o' his boots!" mumbled Dick, sucking his mutilated finger.

"I've got it wuss 'n you, Dick," faintly called a voice from behind him. "Ha! don't you hear? Down brakes! My God! over we go—down—ditched— Tell the boss—I stuck to—to her till—till the—last—!"

Poor Mat. Goodheart fell back, the black blood oozing from his lips, and died in the act of putting on the brake.

Ned Allen sickened, and his feet grew faint as he glanced around him. His party had turned the scale and decided the fight against the Californian; but at what a cost! Mat. Goodheart lay dead; Alf. Pickard was severely wounded, while still others bore deep marks of the brief but sanguinary contest. Of the emigrants, the second son, Loammi, had been shot through the brain; Malachi was nearly senseless with a terrible gash in his breast, while Jonathan Grey lay like a dead man, his iron fingers nearly meeting in the flesh of the man who had shot him down from one side while he was battling with several enemies in front. The Mexican was dead, his head twisted half around, his neck broken short off.

Fale and hatless, Mrs. Grey and Jotham's wife came forward, and the prospecters drew silently aside, respecting their grief. The body of Loammi was placed beside that of the murdered Eben. Jonathan was carried to the wagon, and every effort made to restore him to consciousness, while Jotham and Zabdial looked to the wounded Malachi.

The next hour was one of gloom and misgivings. All wounds had been bandaged as perfectly as the simple means at hand would permit; but the dead remained.

Ned Allen sat looking upon the pale face of Goodheart. He was thinking of his poor mother—a widow—far away, who had begged him at parting to watch over and bring safely back her only son. And now—he lay dead. And the mother—perhaps even then praying for her darling boy, and counting up the days that must elapse ere he could return to her arms—how would she bear this direful blow?

"And I coaxed him away—only for me he might be living now, safe and happy with her—"

"Cap," called out Harry Lane, "here's a man holding up a white flag. Shall we let him come forward?"

Allen arose, shaking off his melancholy with an effort. He could see that Lane was right; the enemy had dispatched an envoy with a flag of truce. For a moment he stood in doubt, glancing around him, then said:

"Perhaps I had better go meet him; there's no need of letting them know just how much damage they've done. Do you keep me covered, if there's anything underhand going on."

Springing across the blood-stained track, Allen boldly advanced toward the flag-bearer, who also strode forward to meet him half-way. But the meeting was destined not to take place.

Allen saw the man pause, drop the flag and dash both hands to his left breast as he wheeled half around and fell heavily upon his face, his limbs quivering in the clasp of death. At the same instant a rifle-crack smote sharply upon his hearing.

CHAPTER VI.

GOSPEL GEORGE LISTENS TO REASON.

"Now that begins to be somethin' like it! looks more stylish—more like a raal, ginewine thoroughbred, sech as it does a feller some credit to buck ag'inst. I was jist goin' to git disgusted—I was, so! Was like a feller hookin' a sack o' meal 'th a hole in its latter end—a

blind man could foller the trail with his eyes shet."

The speaker was none other than "Gospel George," as he had given his name, and the remark was called forth by the self-same discovery made later in the day by Ned Allen; the spot where the horse-thief had precipitated the wounded mule into the ravine, after cutting its throat.

The prospecters were greatly in error in supposing their two guests of the night before were confederates. Whatever his past may have been, Gospel George was honest and sincere toward them, and he had lain down to sleep that evening without thought of danger or treachery. But the nature of his life, and particularly that of his present mission, rendered him more than usually acute and easily alarmed. The trembling snort and quick, suspicious stamp of his mule, "Roxy Ann," were sufficient to arouse him from sleep. Though his eyes opened, he did not suffer a limb or muscle to stir that might have betrayed his wakefulness. He could see that one figure was missing from the circle, yet could not make out exactly who it was. By listening intently he could hear somebody or thing cautiously moving among the animals. He was about to spring up and give the alarm, when he saw that the moon was just passing beneath a thick cloud. That decided him. He would pit cunning against cunning, and capture the prowler without giving him a chance to strike a blow. But those moments lost in waiting for the gloom were fatal to his hopes. The stampede was effected, and he could only take a snapshot at the dimly seen figure as the horse-thief dashed down the valley. With the marvelously acute ear of a true hunter he heard the bullet strike solid flesh, and bounded forward with a wild yell, to secure his game. Again he was doomed to disappointment. The hoofs clattered on and on, nor did he hear the expected thud of a falling body. Still he pressed on, keeping within hearing of the trampling hoofs for over a mile, before all sounds died away. He halted. All was still, save for the faint breathing of the night breeze among the pines and junipers.

For a few moments he deliberated whether to retrace his steps and join company with the prospecters, or await them where he was. He quickly decided upon the latter course, and squatting down under a scrubby pine tree, he lit his pipe and waited for dawn with what philosophy he could muster.

With the first glimmer of dawn he was up and at work. He was not delayed long in his search for the trail. Not twenty paces from the pine-tree the stolen drove had passed, and among the crowded tracks he had no difficulty in picking out those made by his own Roxy Ann. Nor was this all. A broad grin overspread his face as he noticed a little clot of blood—then another and another, sprinkled along the trail. Without further thought of the prospecters, he started along the trail at a long, half-running step that carried him over the ground with amazing rapidity.

"Who'd 'a' thunk that slab-sided, lantern-jawed, man-shaped hoop-pole 'd hev so much blood! Ef he hain't bled a good bar'l full a'ready, then I'll never eat a nigger baby no more! He must peg out 'fore long—less he's like a feller I knowed oncet—all blood."

But before Gospel George had followed the trail another mile, he divined the truth.

"I'm 'most sorry I undertuck the job," he declared to himself, since there was no other auditor at hand. "It's mighty low-down work fer a gentleman as has tuck his deplomer in ginewine skientific trailin', afore he could walk alone; mighty low down this follerin' a trail broad an' deep an' plain enough fer to be that of a bleedin' airtquake. Only fer Roxy Ann I'd pull out, durned ef I wouldn't. Jest think! Thar was that time, to settle a bet of a twenty-seven hand mule load o' gold dollars. Feller ketched a bee; rid with it through nine counties, three on 'em backward an' blin'folded, then let the bee loose. Just two weeks a'terward they showed me the place, I tuck up the trail. 'Twas powerful tryin' on the eyesight, but my nose helped me through; In jest seven hours, nine minutes an' a little more, I holed that bee! Now that's what I call pritty far trailin'."

Really anxious as he was to recover his mule, Gospel George gave a little grunt of satisfaction, while his eyes sparkled vividly. He saw that he would have to exercise his boasted powers as a trail-hunter in good earnest now, or abandon the pursuit as useless.

"Now that's what I call somethin' like!" he chuckled, grimly. "I reckon the coon got this far afore he found out what a nice painted trail he was plantin' ahind him. Ef them boys was only here now—they'd l'arn somethin' they'll never spell out fer themselves, fer they don't make sech smart men nowadays as they did when I was a boy. But I can't wait here. That feller's travelin' monstrous lively—'most a mile a minnit, I reckon. Lord! ef them mules was all on 'em like my Roxy Ann! Ef they war, I'd jist turn 'round an' walk t'other way. I'll meet him a good sight sooner. The way that pesky critter kin travel when she don't

want to go back'ards, I mean. Walk? Jest let her git a good healthy stretch on an' a quarter-hoss couldn't tetch a ha'r; not much! An' trot an' run—go 'way, greased lightnin'! Didn't I try it oncet? Waal, I should re-mark! Jest to show some o' the boys what she *could* do when she'd a-mind. She run so fast the wind stripped me clean out o' the saddle an' landed me seventeen mile t'other side o' whar we started! It's a scan'alous fac', gentlemen! Nor I don't reckon I'd 'a' landed then, only a double-distilled harrycane met me right thar, an' atween the two I kem down. I never tried it on ag'in. 'Twas too tryin' on my wardrobe. I hed jest one waistban' an' hafe a gallus left when I lit. I tell you, gentlemen. Roxy Ann ain't no slouch, she ain't."

The foregoing was not uttered as it is printed here, but in snatches as Gospel George followed the trail, and with long or shorter intervals as the trail was open or difficult. And right here, reader, allow me to make one remark on my own hook. In Gospel George I am attempting to paint a *real, living* character, personally known to myself. An inveterate liar at all times and seasons, he was still an *honest* one, and would as soon strike a bosom friend as tell a purely *malicious* lie. With an appreciative audience he was in his glory; *facts* that would have astounded Sinbad, Baron Munchausen or even Marco Polo, flowed from his tongue smooth as oil; and, lacking an audience, he would talk *to himself* in the self-same strain. More than once have I overheard him, when he believed himself alone. I allude to this that you may know I am not without authority in placing such a character upon paper.

With the steady perseverance, if not quite so speedy, of a sleuth-hound, Gospel George picked up the trail, now grown difficult enough to satisfy even his pride. The ground was hard and rocky, and the unshod mule hoofs had only left an occasional sign. Often for several hundreds of yards the trailer would press on without pausing to search closely, guided alone by the formation of the ground, and as often would he strike the trail at the selected point. Nothing less than this sort of headwork would have carried him through. But, finally—it was high noon—he lost the trail, as it seemed, for good, nor could his keenest scenting recover it. For fully an hour he searched, then, as a last hope, started forward, meaning to make a circuit around the black, barren tract. But the old man's trail hunting was about ended for that day.

Gospel George had found even some faint marks, and was carefully inspecting them, when an unpleasant, oily chuckle came to his ear, causing him to start erect with ludicrous celerity. Before him, seated upon a low bowlder, was a roughly-clad man, grinning broadly as he held a cocked revolver pointed full at the trailer's head.

"Hope I see ye, pard," he chuckled, but a sudden change came over his face as he hissed, "None o' that! tetch a weepin' an' I blow ye through!"

Gospel George stood like a statue, but his keen eyes were glancing swiftly around. So far as he could see, the stranger was alone.

"I don't want to do ye any hurt, stranger, and I won't if you'll only listen to reason," added the fellow, resting his elbow upon one knee and coolly squinting along the leveled barrel. "You're old enough an' ugly enough to 've got some sense. You kin see I've got the drop on ye, nor I ain't the critter to miss the bigness of a man at this range. It'd be a monstrous pity to spile sech a figger-head—honest, stranger, you're prittier'n a spotted purp! But I've got to do it, onless you'll listen to reason."

"I was fed on reasons ever sence I was pupped, stranger," quietly replied Gospel George. "I'm 'greeable to reason with ye from now tell the cows come home; ef you'll give me fa'r play. 'Tain't fa'r for one to stan' while t'other squats."

"They's a rock right aside ye. Hold up your hands an' squat soon's ye like. But mind. The fust crooked motion, an' you'll chaw lead."

"I ain't hungry enough for that, just now, though I hev ett some in my day," said the trailer, literally obeying the stranger's commands. "Now—sence you're hefty on reasons, mebbe you'll tell me what you've halted me fer?"

"'Cause I was told to," was the prompt reply. "'Cause I was told to lay fer you an' take you pris'ner ef you come this fur."

"They was a man tried that oncet, an' he never come home to supper. Some folks say he tuck sick an' laid down an' died," smiled Gospel George, his eyes fixed upon the stranger with a peculiar glitter.

"That man was a fool," grinned the fellow. "He didn't know how to work things up in style. Ef he'd just said, 'You, Dick! Put a bullet through that feller's hat, but don't hurt him the fust time—'"

A sharp crack—and Gospel George felt as though an icicle had been passed swiftly over his head, almost touching the scalp; but not a muscle of his face changed as he raised his hand and removed his hat. A bullet had passed through the crown.

"Or ef he'd p'inted out that powder-horn o'

your'n an' called—you, Weasel! bu'st the bottom out o' that!"

There came a prompt report from the rear, and Gospel George felt his powder-horn shattered by the bullet.

"Or ef he'd told Cock-eye to comb your b'ard with a bullet—just so!" as a shot sounded from the right of the trailer and tore its way through his tangled beard.

"Waal," said Gospel George, with a sickly laugh, "ef the critter 'd only bin smart enough fer that, I don't reckon he'd 'a' tuck sick a-tall. An' ef you've no objections, I'll take your word for the rest."

"Jest the way I reasoned, old man," with a chuckle. "I told the boss I didn't think you'd make much fuss when I axed you to pay him a visit."

"He must be a monstrous smart man ef he's your boss. But, what comes next? You're runnin' this thing. Ef you want me to stan' on my head or walk goose-step, jest say so. Don't be bashful!"

"I don't want ye to do nothin' so ridiculous, old man. I give you a rough deal, an' you stood it without turnin' a ha'r, and I like you for 't, I do so. Ef 'twas only my say so, I'd shake hands an' tell you to take your own trail. But orders is orders, an' must be kerried out. The boss said fetch you to him, an' I've got to do it. So the more reasonabler you act, why the better you'll be treated, leastwise while you're in our han's."

"You've showed me reasons enough to last me for a year. I ain't fool enough to kick my own brains out. I'll shell out my weepins; or, ef you think that's dangerous, you kin come an' take 'em while your fellers keep me kivered," quietly responded Gospel George, resolved to make the best of a bad bargain.

At a word from the leader, three other men arose from their ambush and came forward. Gospel George delivered up his weapons to the spokesman, and even offered him a rather slender buckskin bag of gold-dust; but this was promptly refused.

"That ain't what we tuck ye fer, stranger, though I don't deny but what we do do a little in that line, when times is hard. That ain't our lay now, though."

Gospel George was not bound, but he saw that the first attempt at escape would insure that precaution, and so walked quietly along with his captors. His thoughts were too busy for much talk, and after a few questions, all of which were adroitly parried, he relapsed into total silence.

The party pressed on rapidly through the hills and passes, with scarce a word, evidently anxious to complete their task. They entered a long, narrow pass, between two towering hills, and full of cracks and niches, which could afford good hiding places for a regiment.

Suddenly two of the men grappled with Gospel George and flung him to the ground, while a voice hissed in his ear:

"Make a sound and I'll blow your brains out!"

CHAPTER VII.

FIGHTING AGAINST FORTUNE.

FOR an instant after being grappled so unceremoniously, Gospel George struggled desperately, but as he heard the warning hiss, and realized how utterly his life was at the mercy of him whose pistol-muzzle was thrust against his temple, he relaxed his efforts and lay passive in their grasp.

"Lively, now!" muttered the leader of the quartette. "Pick him up an' kerry him back in the rift, while I see who it is comes this way. Don't pester him onless you hear my whistle; then put a hole through him an' scratch gravel, hot-foot!"

In that moment, as he lay prone upon the ground, Gospel George could distinguish the muffled thud of a horse's hoofs, at full gallop, apparently drawing nearer with each breath. This, with the words of the outlaw, gave him the cue to his rude treatment.

He was half carried, half dragged into one of the narrow clefts in the face of the rock already alluded to, and while one of the men crouched beside him with cocked revolver held unpleasantly close to his ear, the other two peered eagerly out into the pass.

There was a brief interval of breathless suspense, on the captive's part, at least, then one of the outlaws—him called Weasel—gave a grunt of relief, muttering:

"It's nobody but Black Diaz, after all."

Gospel George heard a sharp challenge, and from the sudden cessation of hoof-strokes, knew that the rider had promptly obeyed; but though he listened with an intensity born of his precarious situation, in which a single hint might prove invaluable, he could not catch a word of the conversation which followed. There was nothing for it but to lie still and await the result with what patience he might.

The parley, whatever might be its purport, outlasted the patience of Weasel, anyhow, and with a little oath, he said:

"You fellers mind this coon. I'm goin' to see what them cusses is jabberin' so much about—"

an' us yere with empty stomachs sence las' night, durn 'em!"

"An' he'll fill it—with lead," grinned Cock-eye. "Don't be a bigger fool 'n natur' made ye, pard. When Devil's Dan holds the lines, it's a fool hoss as tries to jump the traces. Now you hear me!"

The hatchet-faced outlaw subsided, though not without muttering some vague threats, at which his comrades only grinned knowingly. The prisoner gave a little start as he heard the chief outlaw's *Satanic nom de nique*, and a peculiar fire filled his eyes, which might easily have betrayed the intense interest he felt, had he not quickly closed them, fighting hard to steady his quivering nerves. Fortunately for him, the approach of Devil's Dan allowed his brief emotion to pass unobserved by his captors.

"Fetch him out, boys," cried the outlaw, hurriedly. "They ain't no time to lose. We must git to the house double quick, fer the boss 'll want us, every one, ef I don't miss my guess."

"What's in the wind now?"

"Hot work fer the boys, I reckon. They ain't time to tell it all now. Fust thing is to git this critter safe to the boss. Lift his head, Dick, while I put the blinders on."

Gospel George seemed about to speak, as his head was rudely lifted from the ground, but he was afraid to trust his voice so soon after his great discovery, and quietly submitted to the inevitable. Devil's Dan evidently misunderstood this start, for he spoke reassuringly.

"Don't be oneasy, pard. You ain't a-goin' to be hurt while in my keer. Only it's a rule o' our'n never to show any man what ain't one on us, the road to our nest, an' so we must tie your peepers up fer a bit. Thar—I reckon you'll do Now, boys, lend a han', an' hyste him up—so! Jest hold tight to Black Diaz, old man, 'less you want to tumble off an' break your blessed neck fer heeps."

"Whar you takin' me to, anyhow?" asked Gospel George.

"To the boss. They's big news come, an' so we're in a monstrous hurry. You jist hold on an' never mind talkin'. Skin out, Diaz! I reckon we kin keep 'longside, over this trail. Whoop'er up, now!"

Gospel George clung to the Mexican behind whom he was seated, as the horse started off at a rapid pace. He steadied his nerves as thoroughly as possible, for he knew that he would need all his wits and coolness to escape from the snare into which he had fallen. And escape he must. To fail meant death—if his suspicions were well founded; and the carefully planned capture, with the discovery of Devil's Dan, went far to assure him that he was known. Escape he *must*; but how? He was unarmed, in the power of four stout, resolute men. The chances looked poor, yet he did not lose all hope.

For a time, by bending his mind solely upon that, he managed to keep his bearings, registering every turn and deviation upon his mind's eye; but then he grew uncertain and confused, each passing moment making matters worse. In desperation he raised one hand and pushed the bandage partially aside, so that he could catch a glimpse of their progress. But keen, watchful eyes were upon him, and the sharp voice of Devil's Dan immediately called a halt.

"You're a monstrous fool, old man, to throw away your chancies like that," he said, sternly, as he pulled the prisoner from his perch. "I wanted to treat you like a white man, but you won't hev it so—more fool you!"

"I thought you was losin' the way, an' I wanted to see so's I could set you right," muttered Gospel George.

"You're too mighty kind," grinned Devil's Dan. "We'll save you all that trouble! Now, mind. The more tricks you try to play, the worse you'll be treated. Hyste him up, boys; steady, thar!"

Knowing the utter folly of resistance, he could only end in rougher usage, without benefiting him in the slightest, Gospel George submitted to have his hands bound behind his back. He was thus placed on horseback behind the Mexican, and secured against falling off by a couple of turns of a lariat, which passed around the bodies of them both. This arrangement completed, the party once more set forward.

This rebuff, which would have completely disheartened many a stout-spirited man, only served to strengthen Gospel George in his resolve to outwit and escape from the clutches of his captors. Though he made no further attempt to remove the bandage from his eyes, he was far from being idle. He felt that the hastily-applied bands around his wrists could be loosened sufficiently, in course of time, to leave his arms at liberty. The motion of the horse aided him not a little by concealing his efforts, and in a very few minutes he felt, with a peculiar thrill of delight, that one stout effort would set him free, save for the lariat around his body.

Before Gospel George could decide upon his next move, a sharp challenge rung out, seemingly from overhead, and the mustang was brought to a standstill.

"It's all right, West," shouted Devil's Dan. "Never mind the passwords jest now afore him. Is the cap'n in?"

"Reckon so—less he went out t'other trail," came the gruff reply, as a man scrambled down from his rocky perch and drew near them. "What ye got here, anyhow?"

"A feller the cap'n tuck a notion he wanted to see. Cast off the laryit, Diaz; steady, boys, let 'im down easy; boss said petickler he wasn't to be hurt. You keep him yere until I come back. I ain't sure the old man wants him tuck to the Home ur over yender. Come 'long, Diaz—quick-foot!"

Lying flat upon his back, Gospel George could now catch a faint glimpse of his surroundings by looking "down his nose." The four men were standing together before him, conversing in low tones. Beside them stood the mustang, panting and sweaty. If he was only once in the saddle! How gladly he would run the risk of being picked off before he could gallop out of pistol range! At least there would be a chance for life, while certain death awaited him if "the boss" was indeed the man he suspected.

That thought decided him. With a steady strain, he felt the hastily-tied knots yield, and then give way. His hands were free. He could see from the position of their feet that just at that moment the four men had their faces turned away from him, and quick as thought he pulled the bandage down over his face and leaped lightly to his feet.

The man called Weasel was standing nearest him, and, like the others, he wore a revolver upon each hip, thrust into half-scabbards, a stiff spring closing over the trigger-guard, holding it firmly in place, yet allowing the weapon to be drawn free by a quick, sharp tug.

To grasp the weapon, to hurl the astounded outlaw with resistless force against his fellows, to leap into the saddle and urge the snorting mustang along the back trail was but the work of an instant.

Yelling and cursing, the outlaws opened fire upon him, but their aim was anything but steady under the surprise, and Gospel George laughed shrilly as he sunk behind the body of his animal and thundered down the pass. But the alarm was given, and he knew that it would be a race for life or death—and he upon a jaded, footsore beast!

Glancing back as he passed the curve in the pass, he saw that not only were the four men pursuing him on foot, but that several horsemen were galloping down a steep trail beyond, shouting furiously and brandishing their weapons.

"Let 'em come!" grated the fugitive, his eyes glowing. "All on 'em won't go back on thar own feet! Ef 'twas ondy Roxy Ann 'stead o' this pesky brute—wouldn't I show 'em?"

Before the chase had lasted five minutes, the fugitive could see that his cause was well nigh hopeless—that he must be speedily run down, unless some unforeseen chance should turn up in his favor. His horse was well nigh broken down, and labored heavily over the rough, rocky trail.

Gospel George smiled grimly as he glanced back and saw that the outlaws were steadily gaining upon him.

"Let 'em come! Better that way then to hev him ketch me, anyhow!"

He looked at his captured pistol, and assured himself that the caps were sound, that the cylinder revolved freely, that the weapon could be depended upon to give a good account of itself when the time came. And then once more he glanced back as he gathered up the reins.

Upon what a trifle, seemingly, does one's life frequently hinge! Just before the fugitive the pass divided, offering two trails, each seemingly equally as favorable. Gospel George felt that the mustang would naturally take the one by which he had so recently come; but as he turned to glance back upon the pursuit, he unconsciously leaned to the left; lightly enough, yet it caused the tired animal to take that pass—and the wrong one!

Less than a quarter of a mile further, Gospel George drew rein with an angry cry. The pass ended abruptly in a deep, yawning abyss! And on came the yelling, exultant outlaws, confident of their victim now.

Sternly defiant, Gospel George leaped to the ground, standing upon the verge of the abyss, covered by the panting mustang. Though death or capture seemed inevitable, he did not quail. With nerves like steel he covered the foremost rider, and fired. The outlaw dropped as though stricken by lightning!

Fairly howling with rage, the outlaws came on, firing their pistols at every leap, raining a storm of bullets upon the one man and beast. And then, death-stricken, the mustang reared back, falling over the escarpment, carrying with it the form of Gospel George.

CHAPTER VIII.

FRESH HANDS IN THE GAME.

NED ALLEN turned around with a cry of horror, as he saw the bearer of the flag of truce spin round and then fall heavily as though dead. Turned around to see young Zabdriel Grey lower his smoking rifle, with a short, shrill laugh of devilish joy.

"Who fired that shot! at an unarmed man—

and he bearing a flag of truce! It was a foul, dastardly murder!"

"I did it, stranger—an' I only wish they was a dozen more 'ithin reach so I could sarve 'em all the same way!" fiercely cried Zabdriel, rapidly reloading his weapon. "You talk about murder! Look yonder—look at them! Two dead an' two a-dyin'. They was murdered—and that man an' his kind they murdered them. Don't talk to me 'bout that! When an' whar-ever I git a glimp' o' any one o' that cussed litter, down he goes ef I kin pull trigger ur grip a knife!"

"I don't deny your having just cause to hate them," promptly replied Allen; "nor can any-body blame you for seeking revenge, provided you do it at the proper time and as a man should. But your shooting that flag-bearer was the act of an unprincipled ruffian. Pooh! man, do you think to scare me with your ugly looks? I mean just what I say, and while I am on hand, you've got to act more like a white man, or take the consequences—that's flat!"

"He didn't know what he was doin', stranger," said a low voice, as a cold hand was rested upon Allen's shoulder. "Don't lay up hard feelin's ag'in' the boy. Think o' what he's gone through—think o' his poor brothers an' his father layin' thar, an' don't be too—"

"Thar, mother," said Zabdriel, with a sudden change in his reckless, defiant demeanor, gently taking her hand. "Never you fear fer us. You go with Alviry, that's a dear. Now, stranger," added the youth, turning to Allen, with blunt frankness, "whether I was wrong or right, the thing is did an' past mendin', nur it won't better him any our comin' to blows over what can't be helped now. You see my excuse thar; but you don't know it all. They stole up on us last night, an' shot him down—my brother, stranger—without a word or sign; shot him down like a dog, even when he was holdin' her in his arms—they was to be married, stranger. But thar—what's the use talkin'? Ef you don't like our way o' doin' business, why you kin go your own way an' leave us to fight our own battles."

All this had passed with the utmost rapidity, and the smoke of the death-shot had barely cleared away when Zabdriel ended. Until now not a sound had come from the cover beyond; it was as though the enemy were paralyzed by the swift death of their herald. But then an angry yell arose, and a volley of bullets were discharged toward the little encampment, though the majority of the missiles fell short of their mark.

"They're comin', cap'n!" shouted Tom Weston, excitedly.

"No sech luck!" snorted Grumbling Dick, nursing his mutilated hand. "They'll take it out in yellin'—durn 'em!"

"Let it be as you say," added Allen, when satisfied that Barnes was right, for the time being, at least. "We'll let the matter drop now. As for leaving you, we cannot do that while you are surrounded by such bitter enemies. Listen; isn't that somebody calling you?"

"It's pap," and Zabdriel hastened to where Jonathan Grey was lying, only to return in a few moments for Allen, who was consulting with his partners over their dubious prospects. "He wants to speak a word with you, stranger; leastwise, he axed for the one who bosses this party, an' I reckon that means you."

In silence Ned Allen followed his conductor to where the wounded patriarch lay, and he gazed down upon the scarred form with a feeling little short of awe.

Jonathan Grey met his gaze with a faint smile.

"I cain't shake hands, stranger, though I'd like it well. I didn't see much of it, but Jerushy—my wife, stranger—Jerushy she said you fit for us like a major, an' I want to thank ye for 't."

"There's no thanks needed, friend," quickly replied Ned Allen. "We saw that you were outnumbered, and so struck for the weaker side, as any white man would have done. I am only sorry that we didn't come along sooner—then all this might have been prevented."

"No, it was bound to come, sooner or later. I'll tell you why, ef you kin answer me one or two questions."

"But hadn't you better wait?" interrupted Allen, as he saw the beads of cold perspiration start out over the broad forehead of the wounded man as a spasm of bitter pain stiffened his muscles. "Wait until you are stronger."

"I'll be weaker afore I'm stronger—but don't breathe a word to her!" he muttered, with a sidelong glance toward his wife, who now sat beside the sobbing Minnie. "I'm dub'ous it'll be her death; we've bin pullin' together so long—most forty year, stranger, Jerushy 'n me. But what is to be will be, I reckon."

"While there's life, there's hope," feebly muttered Allen, but Jonathan Grey paid no attention to the remark.

"I reckon you're out a'ter gold, like the rest on us, ain't ye?" Allen nodded. "I thought so. You see the sort of people we be, stranger. Thar's three wimmen an' two young uns, an' by sun-up to-morrow, I reckon they'll only be two men left to look a'ter 'em; that's mighty weak-handed, stranger."

Allen read aright the wistful, anxious expression in the old man's eyes, and promptly replied:

"I pledge you my aid, as far as it goes, friend, and I think I can answer for each one of my friends. We will guard your people safe to their destination, and no one shall injure them without first climbing over us."

"I most knowed you'd say as much, but I wanted to make sure, fust. You won't lose anythin' by it, stranger. Look yere," and as he spoke the wounded patriarch produced the nugget of gold from among the folds of the blanket upon which he was lying, holding it up before the dazzled eyes of the young prospector.

In tones that grew stronger as he proceeded, Jonathan Grey told the story of his wonderful discovery, and gave his earnest opinion that the valley, or at least the water-course, would be found wonderfully rich in gold. It needed few words to convince Allen. The best argument lay poised in his trembling fingers.

"Thar's enough fer all, never fear," panted Grey, beginning to feel the effects of his prolonged exertions. "I only ax that you give my people a fa'r shar', an' to join 'em ag'in' that cussed greaser an' his gang."

"I'll do it—as God is my judge!" solemnly uttered the gold-hunter.

The conversation ended there, for Grey was growing too weak for further speech. Deeply impressed with what he had heard, Ned Allen withdrew from his side and rejoined his comrades, having decided to lose no time in imparting to them the substance of the communication made by Jonathan Grey. This he did in a few words. Only the presence of the dead and dying prevented them from venting their glad excitement in wild cheers at the glad tidings. At last it seemed as though they had indeed stumbled upon the marvelous valley of gold described to them by the grateful Chinook.

Yet, in their excitement they were not unmindful of the tacit pledge given in their names by Allen, and each man repeated it, with more or less fervor. It should be share and share alike, even down to the two little children.

"We'll lay out the ground into regular claims," said Allen, finally. "There will be one for each man, woman and child, dead or living. We will each do our share of work on the claims of those who may be either dead, too ill or young for the labor, and give a sacred account of the proceeds. But, besides this one point—the working for the dead or disabled, I mean—each man will be at liberty to strike pick when and wherever he pleases, and to save his regular claim against the day when outsiders flock here—as they will do, soon or later. I tell you this, friends, because I mean to draw it all up on paper, for each man to sign and swear to."

There was a great deal more said, but nothing that imperatively needs record here. Some of the men were eager to get to work, if only to select their claims, but Allen overruled this haste. Though nothing had been seen of the enemy since the one false attack just after the death of the flag-bearer, it was only reasonable to believe that they were not far distant, probably lurking around ready to take advantage of any rash movement. It was hardly probable that the Californian would rest contented with the one repulse.

The afternoon waned, the sun sunk to rest and the shades of a clear, cloudless night settled over the valley of gold—the valley of death! A vigilant watch was kept throughout the night, but there was no attempt at surprise on the part of the enemy, nor was there any sign of them at daydawn.

With the coming of dawn, Jonathan Grey seemed to have improved not a little, but Malachi still lay in a deathlike stupor, evidently sinking fast.

Ned Allen, with Jotham Grey and Dick Barnes, ventured forth on a scout, and soon satisfied themselves that the little valley was deserted by all save their own party and the ones who had fallen during the yesterday's struggle. These were dragged to the foot of the hills and covered from sight in a deep crevice among the rocks. A broad grave was dug beside the lake shore, and after a brief, heartfelt prayer by Allen, the two dead brothers were committed to the earth amid the sobs and tears of their bereaved kindred.

This was hardly completed, when Harry Lane came hurriedly in from his lookout, with startling news. A strong body of horsemen were even then debouching from the pass so frequently alluded to.

"To your stations, boys!" said Allen, his eyes glowing. "And when you strike, strike hard and sure. Remember we are fighting for more than life, now. There are helpless women depending on our arms. Make every bullet count."

The enemy, over a dozen strong, seemed bent on stern and deadly work, as they had but little time to waste after passing the live-oak tree. Scattering out, shielding themselves as much as possible behind their animals, they thundered forward, with loud, wild yells.

"Steady, men!" shouted Allen. "Save your fire until you can make each bullet count!"

At that moment came a cry of terror from

Minnie Brady, and turning his head, Allen saw the cause of her affright. From the hillside beyond the river, over a score of rough-clad men were darting down, through the stream and toward the camp, firing as they ran. And on came the horsemen, as though bent on riding over the little party. All seemed lost. Yet not a man flinched as the dreadful clash came.

CHAPTER IX.

A COOL CAPTIVE.

A WILD chorus of angry yells arose from the infuriated outlaws as they saw the wounded mustang rear up and then fall back, bearing with him the helpless fugitive, down upon the ragged boulders of the canyon below; furious because he had escaped their tender mercies by a death so instantaneous. And, too, the thought came: how would their master receive their report, after so sternly demanding a sound, unharmed captive, to receive only a mutilated corpse?

Peering into the depth they could see the shattered mass of flesh and bone, marking the spot where man and beast had fallen. They saw that Gospel George had fallen upon the body of the horse, was now lying across the bleeding mass.

To make assurance doubly sure, Weasel cast aside his weapons and outer clothing, then nimbly descended the rock wall, though there seemed scant footing for a cat. He bent over the prostrate figure for an instant, then rose erect with a yell of wondering exultation.

Though the chances were scarcely one in a thousand, Gospel George had escaped death, thanks to his falling feet foremost upon the wounded mustang. The shock had rendered him senseless, had bruised and shaken him very severely, yet the experienced Weasel saw that he was living, that no bones were broken, that he was only stunned for the time being.

The glad shout gave no little relief to those above. A wholesome dread of their fiery master's anger overcame their thirst for revenge, and they were now full as anxious to preserve a sth they had been to destroy. Under Weasel's directions, several trail-ropes were securely knotted together, and lowered to him. Passing the noose around the senseless body, he gave the signal to haul away, and two minutes later Gospel George was lying upon the trampled verge, just where he had dealt his last desperate stroke for life. Weasel quickly followed, not a little elated at the result of his curiosity.

A litter was quickly improvised with rifles and saddle-blankets; and placed upon this, Gospel George was borne along the back trail and up to the outlaws' retreat, with far greater care than would have been bestowed upon an injured comrade. Once here, no efforts were spared to restore him to consciousness.

Yet, despite all this, it was full an hour ere the old man recovered from his frightful fall sufficiently to realize that he was still in the land of the living.

The first object that met his slowly unclosing eyes was the face of a man almost touching his own—a clear-cut, strongly-marked, yet not unhandsome face, a bronzed red, surrounded by short, curling hair of a fiery red hue, with grayish-blue eyes that seemed to burn deep into his brain, so vividly keen and piercing were they. This much he saw in that one glance; then his lids fell, with a low gasp.

"The fool's fainted again!" exclaimed an impatient voice.

But the speaker was wrong. That face, those eyes, so close to his, had acted with marvelous rapidity upon Gospel George. From that moment his brain was clear, his wits keen and wide-awake as ever before in his life. He knew that he had fallen into the hands of a bitter, merciless foe. Between them was a death-feud—a black and bitter score as yet unbalanced. And in that brief spell of apparent insensibility he had determined upon his course. There was yet a hope; faint, yet still a hope.

A quantity of icy-cold water was dashed into his face, which seemed to restore his senses instantly. He raised his head, a vacant stare upon his face.

"Waal, I ber-durned! ef ever I knowed the devil had red ha'r!"

"I have been called a devil," laughed the outlaw; "but just at present I go by the name of Fiery Fred."

"The big boss—that is, I've hearn tell o' you," slowly responded Gospel George. "They said you was killed, but I never b'lieved it. I tole 'em you was doin' too good work on ye'th for the Old Boy to corral you so soon. An' come to think—I don't believe it yit! Dead men don't smell o' whisky—do they, now?"

"Not much, old man! I hold myself worth a dozen dead men yet. And so are you. Rouse up; scratch your wits together a bit, man. I want you to answer a few questions, and I haven't got much time to waste."

"Is he alive, dear?" came a soft voice, as a little graceful figure glided to the outlaw's side, and a rarely beautiful face peered over his shoulder down upon the captive.

"That settles it!" cried Gospel George, with a snort of relief. "The devil couldn't tetch sech a gelorious face with a forty-foot pole, an' they ain't no chauce o' sech as we fellers sneakin' in

to t'other place. An' yit—I'd 'a' swore I was goin' right straight down to—or China-land!"

"It was a fall such as few men ever live to dream of; and you are scarcely bruised, I am happy to say. Glad, because I have work for you to do. But first, who and what are you? What is your business in this place?"

"Stranger," replied Gospel George, with a quick glance around him, "that's what I wouldn't tell to no livin' man 'cept you. I've learned wisdom in my old age. I used to tell everybody everything, an' what'd I git fer it? Rotten aigs, mostly, and dead cats; likewise old boots, an' sech like doin's. It's a scan'alous fact! Folks said I was crazy—they did so! An' jist because I came out yere to preach the gospel, a-tryin' my hull best to save my fellow-critters from everlastin' death an' pizen misery, oh—ah!"

"That's played, old man," sharply interrupted Fiery Fred, as he had called himself. "I know more of you and your doings than you think; so jist walk a straight trail or it will be the worse for you. I know folks call you Gospel George; and any one who has measured the length of your tongue can easily guess why! I know, too, that you got drunk one day at Celestial City—ha! that touches you!" and the outlaw chief laughed, triumphantly.

"I was drugged, stranger," muttered Gospel George, with strongly-marked chagrin. "'Spect I talked a powerful heap o' nonsense that time; it's a way I've got whenever I ain't feelin' good, but they ain't nothin' in it."

"There was a good deal in this, though! And now you know jist what I want. But wait one moment. Let me prove to you that I am in dead, sober earnest in this. Know, then, that you have been followed and your every step watched since that day by some of my boys, or by myself. For the last three days I have trailed you. I was on your track when I discovered that party of prospecters. I put one of my men on the trail, then tried to strike some plan to make their acquaintance. Luckily, I stumbled over that grizzly, and so took to a tree after waking him up, knowing that those green-horns would take the bait. You know they did, and I played them for sardines at sorrel-top."

"An' that was you all the time!" muttered Gospel George, with genuine regret, and mentally cursing his blindness.

"No one else. I run off their stock, and your mule with them. From what I knew of you, I felt sure you would follow my trail, so I set the trap you run into. I threatened to kill with my own hand any or every man who dared to injure you. They were to take you alive. They obeyed me. You are here in my power, for me to treat as I will. What that treatment may be depends altogether upon yourself. Tell me where your treasure is; give me plain directions where to look for it, and when I prove your truth that day you shall be set free, to go where you will."

"An' s'pose I don't, what then?" suddenly demanded the prisoner.

"I don't choose to suppose anything of the kind," coolly retorted Fiery Fred. "Any sensible man will give up his gold before he will his life; and you don't look like a fool. Tell you must, sooner or later, and the less delay you make, the better you will fare at our hands."

"You can't make me speak ef I don't want."

"Don't bet high on that, or you'll go broke, sure. I can make a dead man find his tongue, if I set to work in earnest."

"You cain't mine. That's bin tried afore. I was tied up and roasted for three weeks at a stretch, oncet. Then they tuck an' anchored me at the bottom of a crick for nine days; but I jist lay still untel the fishes nibbled the ropes loose, then I dove down stream seven miles, an' so got away. 'Nother time they strung me up an' skinned me alive. They did it three times, ontel they wore out all thar knives, an' then they give it up es a bad job. Unless you've got a-plenty o' spar' time, I wouldn't 'vise you to ondertake sech a monstrous job, stranger."

"Bah! that's nothing but child's-play to what I'll do to you, unless you spit out what I want. Now, look—I'll leave you here for half an hour, as I've work to do. At the end of that time I'll return. If you've concluded to save your hide by the only method it can be saved, well and good; if not—then good-by, Gospel George."

With these words, Fiery Fred passed his arm around the young woman's waist—who had been listening to all with lively interest—and left the chamber.

Gospel George lay motionless where they left him, knowing well that, though unbound, while no living person could be discovered, any attempt at escape would be worse than useless. The apartment in which he found himself seemed to be a natural cavity in the rock, the walls bare and rugged, though the floor was tolerably smooth. A dim light sifted through sundry cracks and crevices in the ceiling, rendering objects sufficiently visible.

Despite his precarious position, Gospel George felt intensely relieved, for he knew that his enemy had not recognized him for the man he really was, or how different would have been his reception! Instead, Fiery Fred was following a false trail—and only that he shrewdly be-

lieved himself to be closely watched, Gospel George would have laughed outright. In an idle moment he had boasted of a marvelous placer of gold to which he alone knew the trail; a fable to which there was not a particle of truth, but which had so strangely brought him and his bitter enemy together after the lapse of long, weary years of vain searching.

His brains were very busy during that brief respite. He felt assured that his life was safe as long as the supposed secret remained unspoken. And surely he could effect his escape before the covetous outlaw's patience was entirely exhausted.

At the expiration of the half-hour, Fiery Fred reappeared. He spoke very harshly, and had evidently been drinking. Twice he demanded the secret, and twice he was denied. Then he said, coldly, cocking a revolver and stooping until its muzzle fairly touched the prostrate man's temple:

"This is the last time; tell me, or I'll blow your brains out!"

Gospel George looked full into his eyes, and laughed aloud. And at that instant, whether purposely or not, the revolver was discharged.

CHAPTER X.

A FIERY LOVER.

At a point almost equidistant from the outlaws' retreat and the little valley in which Jonathan Grey had made the discovery of gold in such an extraordinary manner, stood a square, massive building of stone. There was little of beauty or grace in its style of architecture, resembling nothing more nearly than a gigantic dry-goods box lying upon its side. The roof was flat-topped, surrounded by a parapet a yard in height, in which, as was the case with the walls below, were pierced numerous loopholes. Its few windows were very narrow, and were defended by stout iron bars. The building stood in one corner of a large court-yard, formed by a high, thick wall of rough stones. Along the inside of the wall ran a narrow platform upon which defenders could stand and wield their weapons in case of assault. The one gate giving admittance to the court-yard and house, was an enormous mass of iron and wood, stout enough to resist anything short of cannon, and well nigh impervious to fire. Around the hacienda were scattered sundry corrals and cattle-pens, out-buildings and brush *jacales* for the accommodation of peons, vaqueros and other out-door servants.

Within the building, occupying a large, low-ceiled apartment, were two persons, father and daughter, whom the reader has already met, and whose names were Senor Don Estevan and Inez Mendoza.

The Californian was rapidly pacing the floor, his still armed heels ringing an angry tune upon the smooth flagging, and more than once his watch was lugged from its fob, impatiently consulted, then returned with a muttered curse of hot impatience. A perfect contrast to this was the demeanor of Senorita Inez, half-reclining in the depths of an easy-chair, indolently watching the thin curls of blue smoke arising from her cigarette, or issuing from her pouting, rose-tinted lips. But then came an abrupt change. The deadened fall of a horse's hoofs in full gallop across the turf, momentarily paused at the huge gate; then the ringing clatter of iron-shod hoofs upon the stone flooring of the court-yard, announced the arrival of an expected visitor. Don Estevan ceased his walk, sinking into a chair and banishing all traces of anxiety or impatience with the skill of a veteran actor. Senorita Inez flung aside her cigarette, with what sounded suspiciously like one of those piquant demi-oaths the *lingua Española* fairly teems with, while her mobile countenance assumed an expression of cold politeness that spoke volumes.

The door opened and a grizzled major-domo bowed admittance to a tall, dashing cavalier, richly, almost gaudily dressed in full Mexican garb. With a quick, familiar nod to Don Estevan, he advanced and sunk upon one knee before Inez, gracefully raising her little hand to his mustached lips, as he doffed his sombrero.

"I feel that I live now, for the first time in three weeks," he whispered, his bright eyes pointing the remark. "And you, dear Inez; have you no kind word—not even a smile, for me?"

"If smiles were your need, senor," coldly replied the lady, with a curl of her rosy lip, "you could obtain them nearer home, and far more readily than here, if the truth must be told."

"I do not understand you, Inez," and the cavalier arose, his brow wrinkling.

"Frown at Pedro, the One-eyed, senor, not upon me. Yet you must not wonder that tongues will tell what curious eyes behold; and where a half-blind man can look his fill on kissing and embracing upon the high-road, there seems little wish for concealment."

"And you lend ear to such lies, from a blind, drunken slave? Inez, you should know me better. Where my heart is placed, there my lips follow, or not at all. Since I parted from you, I have not spoken one word to a lady, much less—"

"Enough!" cried the lady, her flashing

her lips curling with contempt too deep for words. "If I had ever doubted your utter worthlessness, your own tongue would have convicted you. Know, then, most faithful knight and mirror of truthful honor, that I saw you, no later than three evenings since, at the foot of Our Lady—ha! that touches you, senior!"

Fiery Fred—for he it was—strove in vain to stifle a curse of mortified rage as his mask was so clearly torn aside. Just then a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he turned to confront the stern-faced Californian.

"I, too, saw you, Senior Gonzalo, and only that I hoped you could explain all, satisfactorily, you would have been received this day with something far sharper than words. There can be but one answer to such an insult." Then he added, in a hurried whisper: "Make no reply, but come with me—I insist!"

Though the outlaw hesitated, he finally obeyed, following Don Estevan into an adjoining room. When the door closed behind them, a sudden change came over the Californian's face.

"Of all blind fools you are the blindest, Fiery Fred," he exclaimed, angrily. "Had I not repeatedly warned you, there might be some excuse, but knowing Inez so well, knowing that she was only seeking for some excuse, you must thrust that girl down her very throat, and make love before our eyes in plain daylight."

"It was not my fault," sullenly replied the outlaw. "Twas her doings, all. I've tried to get rid of her—"

"Bah!" interrupted Don Estevan, with a sneer. "Do you expect me to believe that, when I know that a single word of yours, spoken to any one of your men, would have put the child beyond all chance of making trouble? Well, such as it is, the work is yours. I have kept my promise and my conscience is clear."

"And you dream that I'll let you draw back now? Not if I know myself!" laughed Fiery Fred, harshly. "If Inez tries to play the prude, you must put the curb on her—yes, I say *must*, and *must* I mean. You know me pretty well. You know what I can do, and what I *will* do, unless you work on my side. Let me tell you, Senior Don Estevan de Mendoza, that I have not been idle. I have doubled my force; in less than two minutes I can bring a dozen stout boys to my side, ready and eager for work; in an hour, I can muster full four score; in half a day, as many more men, devoted solely to my will. How long would it take us to clean you out? And more: I know your reasons for leaving Mexico; how easy it would be for me to clap you astride a good horse and carry you back to your anxious friends—"

"Not alive!" muttered the Californian, starting back, one hand buried in his bosom.

"Bah! are we not friends, partners and allies?" laughed the outlaw, carelessly. "Your secret is safe in my hands, so long as you play me fair. Place your daughter's hand in mine, and I promise to forget all that it has cost me so much time and trouble to learn. Refuse and—you can guess the rest."

"I will do all I can," slowly replied the Californian. "But it will be hard work after what she saw."

"The more glorious the victory, then. But the message you sent me by Black Diaz?"

"It is really a serious matter," replied Don Estevan, and he rapidly detailed his meeting with the family of emigrants, and their wonderful discovery of gold, with the events which followed. "You are even more deeply interested in this matter than I—or should be. Let this discovery once get abroad—and the very birds of the air will carry the news unless we act promptly—and what will be the result? There will be an immense rush—thousands will flock here; and among them will surely be some who have known us in times gone by. We will be forced to flee, leaving all. Your retreat will be nosed out, and when once old scores are revived, where will you find a place to hide your head? There is but one thing to be done. We must wipe this party out of existence, nor leave a single trace behind. It can be done, if you will join me in good-will. It *must* be done, or we are ruined."

"That may not be so easy," replied Fiery Fred, thoughtfully. "We can rub them out; yes. But there are others. I dismounted a party of a dozen prospectors—"

"Don't I know it? Only for them I would not have claimed your aid. We had the game in our hands when they came down upon us, killed full half my peons and scattered the rest. They must go with the others. One good blow will settle all; and that blow we must deal, or make up our minds to cross the mountains once for all."

"And that I will not do until I have finished a bit of work I have already begun," resolutely replied the outlaw; and drawing closer together the worthy pair carefully made their arrangements for the morrow.

It is unnecessary to detail these plans at this point. Enough that all was arranged to their satisfaction, when Fiery Fred arose and said:

"We will return to Inez, now. You will tell her that I am satisfied you on the point she raised, I will rest to me."

They found Inez seated where they had left her, and Don Estevan lost no time in following out the line marked for him by the outlaw. Inez listened in silence, but with curling lip that proclaimed her incredulity louder than words.

"It is as your father says, Inez," added the outlaw. "Since you have seen so much, you must know all. I have never claimed to be more than a man; with all the follies of such. There are moments of temptation none of us can resist. I met this girl nearly a year before I saw you. She—I know it sounds conceited, but the facts bear me out—fell in love with me, and I—well, you can guess what followed. When I learned to love you, darling, I sent her away, well provided for, and expected never to see her again. But she hunted me out; and you saw our meeting. I could not be too harsh with her, but she is gone now, for good. This is the whole story, upon my honor. Can you not forgive me, darling?"

"You are taking a great deal of unnecessary trouble, Senior Gonzalo," coldly replied Inez. "What you have been, are, or may become in the future is of not the slightest interest to me. Thus far I have barely tolerated you, because my father wished it. I never even liked or respected you; now I simply despise you."

"Inez!" sharply cried Don Estevan.

"Leave her to me, my friend," laughed the outlaw, but with a glittering eye that belied his tone. "You are foolish, little one, but you will learn better in good time. Love or no love, you are to become my wife—and by this kiss I claim you!"

With a quick motion and a strength which would not be denied, Fiery Fred pressed the maiden to his heart kissing her lips fiercely; then, with a low laugh of triumph released her and passed from the room. He was followed by Don Estevan, and there was some more conversation between them before Fiery Fred mounted his horse to ride over the hills to his retreat.

And as they talked, just without the massive gate, a wild, haggard face looked down upon them from the broad wall near by—a face full of deadly vengeance, of ferocity scarcely human. As though that venomous glare possessed the attributes of the rattlesnake, the outlaw felt himself forced to turn his head and raise his eyes. He saw the wild face, the unearthly, staring eyes, and started back with a little cry. As though in answer came a peal of eldritch laughter—and accompanying it a bright blaze of fire—the report of a firearm.

The spirited mustang reared high, snorting loudly, while Fiery Fred flung up his hands and fell heavily to the ground. Another unearthly laugh, and then the assassin vanished as by magic!

CHAPTER XI.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

WHEN Fiery Fred kissed his final threat into the ears of his bound and prostrate prisoner, with a cocked revolver pressed close against his temple, it is scarcely probable that he meant to put it into such prompt execution, thus destroying forever his hopes of learning the old man's golden secret. Yet there was one watching his every movement who knew so well his hot, unruly temper that she feared his passion would blind his avarice, and urge him on to a deed he would regret when quieted down. Filled with this anxiety, she rushed forward and grasped his arm; but as she did so the weapon exploded. Gospel George lay before him, his face blackened, the blood starting out upon his begrimed features.

With a blasphemous curse, Fiery Fred flung the screaming woman from his arm and knelt over the body of the old man; but a moment later his breath came more freely. Though the captive had not entirely escaped, the hand of Little Paquita had done its work well. The bullet, instead of boring its way through the brain of Gospel George, had spent its force upon the rock floor close beside his ear. Bits of lead and splintered flint had cut his face in a dozen different places, while the concussion had completely stupefied him. He lay like a dead man, but recovery was but the question of a few minutes. Satisfied of this, the outlaw chief rose erect just as Devil's Dan, with several of his fellows, appeared at the entrance, doubtless in answer to the alarm.

"Take this fellow and carry him into the black-hole," quietly ordered Fiery Fred, as though no explanation was needed. "Look well to his bonds, and, though he is to be left alone, see that you keep a good look-out, as usual. Lively, now! Come, Paquita; one word with you before I take the saddle."

The one word extended over half an hour at least, before Fiery Fred left the retreat, following Black Diaz, with red spur, over the hills to the home of Don Estevan de Mendoza, and where the reader has already met him.

Though Gospel George gave no evidence of returning life, he was just conscious of being uplifted and borne along through a cool, winding passage; of coming to a pause, and having his hands firmly bound together, while some one else fumbled at his feet. But all was intensely dark and still around him when he faintly re-

covered his senses and opened his eyes. Fortunately, his tongue was at liberty, though, for a time, his words were disconnected and broken.

He had passed through and endured so much during the few last hours that his agitation was by no means remarkable; indeed, few minds or bodies could have borne up so well. For years his sole object had been to find this man who called himself Fiery Fred; and now he had met him—a bound and helpless captive. Even more than the frightful fall over the precipice had it shattered his nerves to still wear his mask while that hated enemy stood before him, all unsuspecting of the hell of venomous hatred that filled his heart—of the wild, insane longing to shout aloud his real name in the face of his destined victim.

As the hours passed by he grew more composed, his brain became clearer, and he began to realize the full peril of his situation. Fiery Fred would pause at nothing to accomplish his ends. If persuasion failed, then he would make use of torture, and beneath his devilish arts the most stubborn would break down; and yet escape seemed impossible, even were he to succeed in casting off the thongs that bound his wrists.

"Ef I kin only git 'em loose ag'in the time he comes to ax me to tell him!" muttered Gospel George, pausing for an instant in his strenuous exertions for breath. "Ef he'd only come an' stan' afore me thus! I wouldn't ax nothin' more—face to face with nothin' more'n tooth and toe-nail—I'd give heaven itself fer jist sech a chance! But it never 'll be. The devil 'll stan' his friend, an' he'll send some one else."

Yet this doubt did not cause Gospel George to relax his efforts, and within an hour from the time when he first tested the thongs they yielded sufficiently for him to slip out first one hand, then the other, though his wrists had suffered severely in the struggle. This much accomplished, it was not difficult for him to release his feet as well. He could scarce suppress a wild yell of exultation at his success, as he once more felt himself a man, able at least to strike one stout blow for revenge, and he only managed to refrain by claspings one broad palm over his mouth until the temptation was vanquished.

Now that his limbs were at liberty, Gospel George carefully crept around the stone cell in which he had been confined, groping with his hands upon every side, seeking for something which he might use as a weapon when the time for action came. His fingers closed upon a projecting spur of rock that for a time defied all his efforts, but finally he managed to work loose a fragment of probably two pounds weight. Tearing one sleeve from his shirt, he tied it around the stone, thus securing an ugly weapon when in the hands of a stout, resolute man.

Scarcely was this accomplished, when Gospel George ceased his motions, bending forward and fairly holding his breath, as he fixed his eyes upon a faint glimmer of light before him, seemingly far distant. For one breathless moment he remained thus, until convinced that the light was slowly drawing nearer, though he could not discover by what agency.

Quick to resolve and equally quick to execute, he silently crept back to the spot where Devil's Dan had left him, and carefully disposed his limbs as though they were still bound, hiding the severed ends of the thongs around his ankles beneath his feet. He held his rude weapon with a firm grasp partially beneath his body, with every nerve and muscle ready for prompt and resolute action.

He saw the light draw nearer, through his closed lids, though not a sound broke the dead silence. The light shone only in front, so that the bearer was invisible. Slowly his eyes opened, though he made no other motion as the light paused a little beyond his feet. Despite his stout heart, a little thrill of superstitious awe crept over him as his strange visitor still remained invisible. But then the light was suddenly elevated and partially turned so that its rays fell full upon a face—fair, piquant and bewilderingly beautiful—the face of Little Paquita, smiling, friendly, yet with an expression that seemed to implore caution.

In his surprise, Gospel George almost betrayed himself, and the rock dropped from his relaxed fingers as he realized the sort of antagonist with whom he had to deal. He could not crush in that fair face as he had intended.

"Hist! not a word!" muttered the woman, with a quick glance in the direction whence she had come, and speaking in Spanish. "If I am discovered here my life will not be worth a claco!"

Still Gospel George did not speak, fearing to trust his tongue until his strange visitor had made the object of her visit more clear, and feeling nearly sure that she had not come entirely unguarded.

"Senior," added Paquita, in a soft, almost caressing tone, "I could not sleep for thinking of you. There was a voice ringing in my ears—as though my father was speaking to me, senior. And I saw such dreadful things whenever I closed my eyes. I could not rest, and so I came here, though he would kill me were he to suspect."

"Let me loose, an' I'll take keer he don't

never do you no harm, lady," interrupted Gospel George, with well-assumed eagerness.

"Alas! I would, gladly, senor, but what would become of poor me? You forget how I am placed; in his power, his slave, his plaything to caress or curse as his mad humor dictates. It would be different were I a man; then I could act as I chose. But now, I can only assure you of my heartfelt sympathy, senor, and wish our lady may send you strength and fortitude to endure the torments and tortures which await you—unless you are willing to purchase your freedom, to give up your gold in exchange for your life."

"Just what I thought," said Gospel George, with a chuckle. "You're a right piert-lookin' gal, but you can't pull no wool over my peepers—not much! I ain't no sardine, ef I was growed in the woods. You kin jist go back to your hoss-thief feller an' tell him it ain't no go, an' he's a fool fer sendin' of ye—"

"He did not send me," earnestly uttered Paquita. "If he knew my object in coming here, senor, he would murder me! I hate him—I curse him every hour of the day! He stole me away from my home—he murdered my parents, and the man whom I loved as our blessed lady herself! He murdered them, and carried me here, keeping me captive until—bah! why do I talk? What matter is it to me what becomes of you—only—you reminded me of my poor father. I was a fool. I thought that if I were to aid you to escape from this dreadful den, you would be thankful enough to take me with you. Not for good; only until we were beyond his reach. Then I could take care of myself. What matter even if I starved? At least I would be free from him."

"Wait a bit,—don't be so pesky brash," slowly uttered Gospel George, as the woman seemed about to leave him. "How was I to know all this, after seein' you 'long o' him that-a-way? Ef you're in airnest—"

"Then you will aid me?" joyously cried Paquita, coming closer. "But no—I am a fool to even think of honor in a man. You would only deceive, after I had done all I could for you; perhaps give me over to that—"

"I'm a white man," simply replied Gospel George.

"Prove to me that you are sincere—that you will be grateful for my services, then," impetuously cried Paquita. "Trust me as I trust you. Tell me this wonderful secret of yours—tell me where this golden placer is; and then I will believe that you are in earnest."

"They won't nothin' else satisfy you, then?" asked Gospel George, almost sadly, his eyes dimming with a curious mist.

"Nothing! If you doubt me, then I will go." "Come, then, I'll whisper it in your ear," replied Gospel George, his voice loud and stern.

Eagerly Paquita stooped until her warm breath fanned his cheek. Then his long, sinewy fingers closed around her soft throat, and a harsh laugh parted his lips.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW TO MAKE AN ENEMY USEFUL.

"EASY—easy, my little woman! The more you squirm, an' the more you kick, the tighter I'm bound fer to freeze to ye, honey. It's fer the good o' your fri'nds I'm a-doin' of it. 'F you was to open your mouth an' squeal jist oncet, they'd all come a-runnin' yere, an' like's not cut up so rusty I'd hev to climb up the back of every durned— Good Lawd! why didn't ye say so?"

All at once Paquita ceased her struggles and hung limp and nerveless in the old man's hands. Gospel George had forgotten, in his excitement, that he was dealing with a woman, and had worked his sinewy fingers with a will; until the fair face was swollen and blackened, and her senses fled before that suffocating grip. But as her limbs relaxed and she sunk a lifeless weight upon his hands, Gospel George remembered himself and gently lowered the body to the ground, a ludicrous dismay imprinted upon his weather-beaten face.

"My luck, chuck up! I never kin look at a woman-critter, much less tetch her, without bu'stin' up the hull institution! An' yit—who'd 'a' thunk it o' her? A-kickin' an' a-cavortin' like a ontamed filly; an' then to co-lapse like dead-ripe mushmellon afore a buck-nigger! I never see the like. Jest my luck fer her to go dead—ef I only hed some bug-juice or somethin' else fer to fetch her to— Good Lawd!"

This apostrophe was not without its excuse. Even as he stood staring dolefully down upon his handiwork, the body suddenly grew animated, rolling swiftly over the rock floor toward the entrance, then springing erect, with a painful, strained scream. That sound brought Gospel George to his senses, and leaping forward he once more clasped the woman in his arms, pressing one broad palm over her mouth, listening breathlessly to learn if her choking cry for help had been heard without. But as no alarm followed, his mind grew easier, for he now knew that Paquita had visited him unattended.

"Now, honey," he said, giving Paquita a little shake as though to emphasize his words, "I hain't got no more time fer foolin'. You pulled the wool clean over my eyes that time, but I

ain't-a-goin' to give yenary 'nother chaine. I've made up my mind to git out o' this hole, an' you've got to help me—understan'? I know of one way. Fiery Fred thinks a heap of you, I reckon, from all I see'd: an' I reckon he'd take his chaintes o' ketchin' me ag'in rather than lose you fer good; but I'd rather slide out the back door, ef so be thar is one—I'm so pesky bashful! You don't know of none, I reckon?"

But Paquita maintained a sullen silence.

"You don't like the idee o' losin' me, eh?" chuckled Gospel George. "But cain't I coax ye? Lawd, honey, you'd jist ort to see me when I've got the time to spread myself on the coax—it's more fun then gum-suckin', a heap! I ken coax a settin' hen off 'm her aigs in two minnits by the watch. An' as for the gals—but thar; I won't make ye jealous. Easy, now; I ain't a-gwine to hurt ye; but these playthings looks better with a man ahind 'em."

As he spoke, Gospel George was coolly searching his prisoner, gingerly plucking a short, yet stout and serviceable dagger from her bosom, and a richly-ornamented revolver from her girdle. Satisfying himself that this last named weapon was in serviceable order, he added, with a complete change of manner:

"That's foolin' a-plenty; now fer business. I hate to threaten a woman, much less hurt her, but you've got to show me the way out o' this hornet's nest without any more fuss. Ef you walk crooked, or try any more o' your tricks on travelers, why I'll jist putt a bit o' lead through your purty noddle like a mice. It don't sound nice, I know, but I've sworn to do it. Git me safe outside, an' I'll let you go free, unhurt. Now you know what's the layout; which 'd ye rather do?"

"You can murder me, if you choose. I am only a poor girl, and defenseless. But you cannot make me betray him, by aiding his prisoner to escape," said Paquita, quietly, yet with an intensity that told Gospel George only too plainly that he had naught to look for of aid from her hands.

"An' yit a minnit sence you was a-cussin' him for all that's out!"

Paquita answered only by a smile of contempt. Gospel George chuckled complacently.

"So he sent you yere to play me fer a sucker—an' 'stead o' hookin' me, I hooked his bait. Ef the cuss 'd only come hisself! Waal, I must make the best o' what I've got. Now look, I'm goin' to give you one chaine. I'll tie you up an' leave you yere, while I try ef I kin git outside without your help. Ef I cain't, then I'll come back, take you 'long, an' walk right through the gang, with this barker at your head. Ef they putt one finger out to stop me, they'll be jist enough left o' you to make a decent funeral."

"You had better kill me at once," muttered the Mexican woman, her eyes glittering snake-like. "You have insulted me too deeply for us both to live. This earth isn't wide enough for us both, after this night's work. You shall die, though I have to hunt you down and strike you with my own hand."

"I glory in your spunk, honey," grinned Gospel George, "and wish you all the luck you deserve. Now—I hate to do it, fer your tongue sounds sweeter'n fox-grapes afore frost; but I must sorter putt a bandage over your purty mouth—jist fer to keep ye from ketchin' cold. I'm monstrous ashamed o' hevin' to do sech work, but it cain't be helped, though I know I won't be able to sleep fer a month fer thinkin' on it. Thar; I'll make it jist as easy as I kin. Don't think too hard o' me fer this, or I'll pine away an' fade like a bu'sted jimson weed. Thar—I hope you're comf'table. Don't git onpatient. Ef I don't come back inside a hour, somebody else 'll be sure to find ye. Good-by, no v—I'm goin'."

Looking once more to his pistol, Gospel George extinguished the lamp and put it into his pocket, for further use in case it became necessary, and then crept noiselessly through the narrow passage. Ten seconds later he found cause to congratulate himself on his prudence in extinguishing his light. The red glare of a torch suddenly appeared before him, not twenty yards away, the man who bore it either emerging from some side passage or else rounding an angle in the main passage. Even as it was, discovery seemed inevitable. Afraid to attempt a retreat to the dark cell—the only direction left open to him—lest the unavoidable noise should attract the attention he desired to avoid, nothing remained for Gospel George but to crouch low where he was, close to the side wall, and trust to the outlaw's coming within arm's length of his position before discovering his presence. For, of course, he must trust altogether to cold steel, since a single pistol shot would bring the entire gang upon his shoulders.

It was a moment of terribly trying suspense, as the outlaw leisurely strode nearer, until the red glare of the torch fairly covered the crouching figure, and was reflected from his bared dagger. But then the man turned to the right and seemingly passed through the solid rock, leaving a dull, flickering light behind him. For an instant the old man quivered with a sensation of curious awe, but then as the light gradually faded, he realized the truth, and

creeping forward, found himself at the entrance of another tunnel, passing through which he could just distinguish the unconscious outlaw.

Quick to decide, Gospel George entered the passage and followed the red light, risking the chance of the man's turning back. He followed thus for quite two hundred yards, when he saw the outlaw drop the torch and stamp it out beneath his heel, leaving all in darkness the most intense, as it seemed for the moment. Closely hugging the wall, Gospel George awaited the next move, with weapons ready for use; but all was still, save his own rapidly beating heart.

For full ten minutes he remained thus, never moving a muscle. Then he fancied that the darkness was growing less intense before him, and a minute later he could just distinguish the dark figure of the outlaw, who was sitting upon the ground, leaning against the side of the narrow passage. Then he began to realize the truth. The outlaw was acting as a sentinel. The faint gray glimmer must come from out doors, and had, until now, been invisible to his eyes, in a measure blinded by the glaring torch.

What a wild, fierce joy filled the old man's heart as he guessed the truth. The outer world was so near—almost within reach of his hand. Once without that den, a free man, he could make his hand keep his head. And only one life stood between him and that freedom.

Fearing to lose more time, Gospel George resolved to attempt his escape at once, and sinking flat upon his face he crawled silently, inch by inch, toward the unwary sentinel. The knife must do its work, if possible. Keeping close to the side of the tunnel, against which the robber leaned, the old man succeeded in stealing within ten feet without discovery. Fearing to lose all if he attempted more, Gospel George cautiously gathered his limbs beneath him, and then sprung forward, closing with the bewildered sentinel and striking fierce, strong blows with the short dagger taken from Paquita, repeating them with deadly swiftness. The victory proved an easier one than he dared hope. Death-stricken with the first blow, the unfortunate man struggled feebly, in vain striving to give the alarm, his voice dying away in his throat with a husky, uncertain gurgle.

When fully satisfied that his work was thoroughly done, Gospel George arose and brushed the profuse drops from his brow. As he stood he could distinguish the dead man's features, and with a little thrill he recognized one of the four men who had captured him—the one called Cockeye. But he was given little time for thought. Scarcely had he made this discovery when the sound of voices rent his ear, coming from the direction of the light. He heard a stumble, a low laugh and a petulant curse. Then came a clear, sharp whistle, followed by utter silence. He knew that this was a signal, in all probability addressed to the dead sentinel lying at his feet. He stood like one petrified. With freedom fairly within his grasp, to be thus thrust back was horrible!

And once more the signal sounded, impatiently.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO WAS IT?

COOL, quick-witted and ready to act as Don Estevan de Mendoza undoubtedly was, the wild-faced assassin had dealt his blow and then vanished, with a weird, unearthly cry of triumph, before the Californian could move a finger to arrest him. But then, as he saw the figure of his friend and ally lying prone at his feet, bleeding and to all seeming dead, he sprang into life and action. Loudly calling several of his peons and dependents by name, he bade them take the trail of the assassin, nor leave it until they had effected his capture, dead or alive, enforcing all with a volley of curses so deep and bitter that not one of the trailers but breathed more freely when once beyond reach of his heavy hand.

Then Don Estevan turned to the prostrate outlaw, stooping low over him with undisguised anxiety. The face was covered with blood, the eyes only half opened, but with a look of wild surprise or horror frozen in them.

The Californian carefully probed the wound with his forefinger, and an exclamation of intense gratification parted his lips as he found that the bullet had simply plowed its way beneath the scalp, following the shape of the skull and finally emerging near its base. He felt almost assured that Fiery Fred was no more than temporarily stunned, as he could detect no sign of the skull's being fractured. Raising the body in his arms, Don Estevan strode easily through the court-yard and into the house, finally pausing at the door of the room where he had come to an agreement with Fiery Fred but a few minutes before. Turning to the trembling old man who opened the door for him, he said:

"Go send old Jesusita here—bid her bring balsams and bandages for a wounded man. And see that plenty of blankets are brought—in haste!"

Right willingly the old man trotted away upon his errand, while Don Estevan lowered his burden gently to the floor, while impatiently awaiting the aid he had summoned.

Not that there was any love lost between the two, the avowed and the secret robber.

week earlier, and Don Estevan would have greeted the treacherous shot as a lucky wind-fall, would not have deemed it worth while sending in pursuit of the assassin, and, though he would scarcely have allowed the outlaw to remain where he fell, to die or to recover as the fates dictated, he certainly would not have soiled his own hands and dress, nor this, his private room, with the blood of his one-time trusted confederate. Deep down in his heart he hated and feared this man, and a thousand times he had almost nerved his hand to settle all accounts between them with one good, downright stroke of a knife, or a deftly-planted bit of lead. But now: he was in a precarious situation, and relied upon Fiery Fred and his unscrupulous Night Riders to rescue him. To this, then, the reader will please ascribe his angry suspense.

Jesuita—a withered, hideous old crone—soon appeared, bearing all the implements of her craft; for she was nurse, surgeon and apothecary in one, for the hacienda and its belongings. She cut little time to waste. She saw what was expected of her, and without a word performed it. Rapidly clipping away the hair, she washed the wound, then anointed it with a kind of dark, pungent-smelling gum. Whatever this was, it acted like magic upon the patient, who aroused from his stupor, with a moan of pain. Coolly Jesuita held down his hands, which were raised as though to tear away the stinging ointment, until she could place herself astride his person, kneeling upon his arms and holding his head firmly in her lap until the bandage was applied to her satisfaction. By this time, too, Fiery Fred had regained his senses sufficiently to realize that she was working for his good, and so bore her unceremonious treatment with a patience marvelous in one of his temperament.

Her ministrations ended, Jesuita arose and left the room in silence. Don Estevan stooped and lent a hand to the outlaw chief to assist him in rising. But, though his limbs trembled beneath the weight of his body, Fiery Fred refused his aid, and, paying no attention to the angry flush which suffused the Californian's face, he poured out a brimming glass of liquor and drained it at a breath. Not until then did he speak.

"Did you see that—that thing? Did you recognize its face?" he asked, with forced calmness.

"I saw—something," slowly responded Don Estevan. "A man, I suppose, though it looked more like some wild beast. Who do you think it was?"

"Nobody you know," rudely replied the outlaw, pouring out a second glass, with an unsteady hand. "Probably some one who mistook his man."

"I suppose so," drawled the Californian. "Of course you have never made an enemy desperate enough to run such a risk for revenge."

Fiery Fred turned quickly, his eyes flashing hotly, but the speaker was carefully rolling up a cigarette, his face looking open and candid as one who never dealt in equivokes.

"Whether I have or not is no concern of yours," he snarled. "And now—my horse. If we are to carry out that precious plan of yours, I must be riding."

"You will find your animal at home before you, I suspect," said Don Estevan, arising. "I was so deeply concerned about you that I ever gave one thought to it. However, that makes little difference. You know that whatever is mine is yours as well. But are you able to ride?"

"Bah! a flea-bite only," laughed the outlaw, on whom the heavy draughts of strong drink were beginning to have their natural effect. "Order me a horse, and remember that I will be ready to carry out my part of the work whenever you give the signal."

"I have sent some of my men after that fellow, and have hopes they will bring him in. If they succeed, and he is alive, what shall I do with him?"

"Hold him safe until I can see him," said Fiery Fred, after a moment's hesitation. "But if he is the one whom I suspect, your men will never catch him, nor take him alive, even if they should stumble upon him."

"If he is such a prodigy, wouldn't it be better for you to wait until day—or at least allow me to send a couple of fellows with you?" inquired Don Estevan, with real solicitude; but Fiery Fred laughed derisively, as they left the room.

"Never you fear but I'll live long enough to do your work, and after that I'm not fool enough to think you care a curse what becomes of me."

Don Estevan made no reply, seeing that the outlaw was in a prime condition for picking a quarrel at the slightest excuse, and he was not ready for that, just yet. He ordered a horse to be saddled, and when it was brought around, secretly ordered the man to follow as close behind the outlaw as possible without letting him suspect the fact, and to stand ready to aid him in case of danger.

Fiery Fred sprung into the saddle and rode rapidly away, as though never in better bodily condition, though any ordinary man would have been on his back under a less severe injury.

The strong liquor filled his brain, and he urged his panting mustang on over the rough trail at a speed that quickly distanced the man dispatched by Don Estevan as a guardian angel. Seemingly he had entirely forgotten the fact that his well-nigh murderer was still afoot in the neighborhood, for he looked neither to the right nor left, but spurred on toward the den where his Night Riders found secure refuge, nor did he draw rein until the sharp challenge from the niche above recalled his mind.

He promptly gave the password, and dismounted at the base of the hill. Clambering up the steep incline, he entered the cave, treading the short but dangerous passage which led into the main chamber easily as though the darkness were noonday. He found the men were most of them sleeping, lying around the rocky floor in admirable confusion, the main cause of which might be derived from the quantity of mugs, cups and flasks, now empty, but still diffusing a powerful odor of strong if bad liquor.

Fiery Fred paid them but a passing glance of careless contempt, then passed on through a winding passage which terminated in a small, nearly circular chamber, secured by a stout, iron-studded door, and the interior of which was quite comfortably furnished. A little cry of surprise broke from his lips as he saw that the couch or pallet of furs and blankets was untenanted, and he called aloud the name of Paquita, the dull echoes alone answering him.

For a moment he stood like one dazed, but then a low laugh parted his lips, with a little curse at his forgetfulness.

"Of course that's it," he muttered, with an air of relief. "She's gone to pump that rascal, as I bade her. What a fool I'm growing! For a moment I would have sworn he had been here!"

Yet the suspicion had evidently shaken him, for he caught up a brandy-flask and drank long and deeply.

Then he left the chamber, and lamp in hand, passed along through the tunnel which led to the "dark cell," where he expected to find the woman, Paquita.

He paused at the entrance, holding the lamp high over his head. Then he staggered back with a low cry of horror.

He saw that Gospel George was gone—that in his stead lay the young woman, silent and motionless as death. He believed it was death, and his heart felt a sharp pang of grief such as he believed it past experiencing, as he sprang forward and knelt beside the body.

Then, for the first time, he saw that she was bound and gagged. She was nearly black in the face from suffocation, and in a few minutes more would indeed have been dead. With an angry snarl he removed the cords and tore the close-fitting gag from between her distended jaws. Then he rushed back to the little chamber, and returned with a flask of brandy. Pouring some of the liquor in his hand he dashed it madly into her face, pouring a quantity between her livid lips. To his great delight it was swallowed, though with evident difficulty. Encouraged, he repeated the application, and a moment later the large eyes opened with a long sigh.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, fervently. "I thought you were dead, Paquita! But what has happened—where is Gospel George, and how came you here, bound and—"

At that instant there came to his ears two pistol-shots, mingling with a wild, uneasy yell, all of the bitterest agony—then all was silent as the grave.

CHAPTER XIV.

THROUGH THE TOILS.

JUST as escape seemed insured, when freedom was almost within his grasp, purchased with at least one life, Gospel George found himself at bay. It was a bitter disappointment, and for one brief moment he felt his courage fail; but only for an instant, and then he was once more himself, clear-headed and resolute, ready to meet and defy his fate.

A man's mind works with wondrous rapidity at such critical junctures. Gospel George heard the signal repeated with a sharpness that indicated impatient surprise. This told him that the men without were well acquainted with the position of the sentinel, that the entrance was habitually guarded, and that an interchange of signals was customary. If he only knew the proper answer! For an instant he was strongly tempted to run the risk of a reply. If it would only pass muster, what an easy solution of the dilemma.

In the darkness of the tunnel he might easily escape recognition, blinded as the outlaws would be by the contrast with the rosy light of the new day without.

But the risk was too great. If the attempted fraud should be detected, he would indeed be lost. The entrance would be guarded, word would be sent around, and he would then be taken between two fires.

All this flashed through his mind with the rapidity of light, and in the brief interval of dead silence that followed the second signal, he decided upon his plan, if such it could be called, when so much necessarily had to be left to chance.

As noiselessly as possible he propped the dead sentinel against the wall, himself crouching close beside the body. While thus engaged, his hand came in contact with the outlaw's belt, and with a thrill of delight he found that it supported a brace of heavy revolvers and a bowie-knife. It was but the work of a moment to transfer these weapons to his own person, and now, thoroughly armed, he felt his usual confidence fully restored.

"Hellow, in thar!" cried an impatient voice from without. "What kind o' watchin do ye call this, anyhow?"

Gospel George waited until the echoes died away, then gave a long, gurgling breath, like that of one sleeping in an uncomfortable position. The ruse was successful, as a low laugh from without assured him.

"Snootin', by thunder! Ef the boss could only come an' see the nice cuss, now!"

"Who is it, anyway? Shell I roust 'im out with a dornick?" asked another voice.

"Not yit; le's find out who t'is, fust. Ef it's either o' them fellers, why, we kin crowd by him an' then set the boss or Devil's Dan onto his shoulders. That'd save us a heap o' trouble."

"An s'pose he wakes up jist in time to let daylight through us? That wouldn't be so nice, would it?"

"You kin go 'round, ef you're skeered. I'm goin' in this way or ou'st somethin'."

Gospel George easily overheard this conversation, with sensations which may be imagined. He knew that the moment of action was at hand, and that to hesitate meant ruin. If the outlaws were permitted to pass him, they would at once detect the imposition, and would then have the advantage of position which he now held.

He saw a shaggy head raise itself above the platform of rock, and peer keenly into the tunnel, but he knew that eyesight could avail little from there. He uttered another long, rumbling snore, and under its cover he managed to cock one of the revolvers taken from the dead sentinel without giving the alarm. And then he breathed on, steadily, like one soundly sleeping.

A second head made its appearance beside the first, and then the twain cautiously advanced until both figures were distinctly visible to the ambushed hunter. Confident in his screen of darkness, Gospel George made no motion until the leading outlaw was within two yards of his position, then he raised his pistol and fired, point-blank, springing erect at the same instant.

No surprise could be more perfect. Death-stricken, his face horribly mangled by the bullet, the leading ruffian fell heavily back, without a groan. The other man was not allowed time to recover from his surprise. Again the deadly revolver spoke, though with less certain effect, as the terrified outlaw turned to flee at the same instant. Hard-stricken, he plunged headlong, uttering a yell of agony. And then Gospel George sprang lightly over the writhing wretch and out into the open air.

The victory was his, but he knew that a moment's delay might render it worse than useless. The pistol-shots, the piercing yell of the wounded man would arouse the entire gang of Night Riders by echoing through the hollow hill. Ere many minutes his escape would be discovered, and then pursuit, hot and persistent, would be made.

With the sure and agile foot of a mountain sheep, Gospel George sprang from rock to rock, down the slope, across the narrow valley, and up the opposite side, running openly as long as he dared, then creeping and crawling behind bushes and boulders, taking prompt advantage of every corner, nor pausing for breath until the summit of the ridge was gained.

There he did pause, crouching beneath a leafy shrub and peering across at the hollow hill. He saw a single man standing near the entrance to the tunnel, gazing eagerly around, pistol in hand. Despite the bandaged head, he recognized the form of his deadly foe, Fiery Fred, and the wild light again filled his eyes as he cocked his revolver, with trembling hand, and leveled it at the outlaw chieftain. There was a blood-red mist dancing before his vision, and he could not distinguish the sights. He brushed one hand across his eyes, with a furious curse. But when he looked again his enemy had disappeared.

"Lord God! is it always to be thus?" he groaned, clutching his throat so fiercely that his nails drew blood. "Is he ever to fail me? Will I never wash out the past in his foul heart's blood?"

Fortunately for him, this outburst of passion was as short-lived as it was violent, for he speedily saw that there was yet work before him ere he could hope for security. Full a dozen men emerged from the tunnel and scattered around upon the slope, evidently looking for some sign by which to determine the probable course taken by the fugitive. But Gospel George did not wait for this. He saw that Fiery Fred was not one of their number, and so he stole away until hidden by the hill's crest, after which he traveled more rapidly, leaving as faint a trail behind him as possible. Placing another ridge behind him, the old hunter again paused, to determine his future course, while

not forgetting to keep a good lookout lest some of the searchers should chance across his trail.

"Thar's jest one thing to do," muttered Gospel George, after a deep thinking-spell, uttering his thoughts aloud, though unconsciously. "I've holed him at last, an' its jist hangin' around on-tel we meet face to face. The time'll come—it must come!"

Once more the cool and crafty scout, Gospel George, knew that he was too near the aroused hornets' nest, and abandoning his covert, he leisurely picked his way through the rocky hills, after doubling and making detours, yet not with the air of a man who is roaming at random. But whatever his purpose was, it was speedily abandoned as he paused upon a high ridge from the summit of which he could catch a glimpse of the hollow hill in which Fiery Fred and his lawless gang found refuge.

He saw a body of horsemen riding through the valley below him, and at their head he could distinguish the outlaw chief. His face lighted up and his lips quivered like those of a hound upon a fresh scent. He traced the winding of the valley, and saw that he could easily keep abreast of the party, if he chose.

"They're up to some deviltry," he muttered, gliding rapidly along the ridge, yet keeping carefully screened from the sight of those below. "I'm goin' to find out what it is. He's thar—mebbe I'll get my chance at him after all!"

With dogged perseverance he kept within sight of the little cavalcade, though he had by far the most difficult route of the two. Mile after mile he dogged them, until he saw the party draw rein and dismount. A moment's watching convinced him that their journey was not yet ended, though each horse was securely tethered within a little clump of trees. He saw that the men were examining their weapons, while Fiery Fred and Devil's Dan ascended the hill until hidden from his eyes by the thick shrubbery. He watched patiently until they returned. He saw the entire party head to the left and creep up the hill at another point and then disappear over the crest.

"It's over yonder, whatever they're after, an' I'm goin' to hev a finger in the pie!" muttered Gospel George, when fully satisfied that the party did not intend returning immediately.

Rapidly descending the slope, he crossed the narrow valley and clambered up the opposite steep. In a few minutes he reached a position from whence he could look down upon a beautiful little valley—the same to which reference has so frequently been made during the course of this story.

At a single glance he took in the whole. The camp beside the lake, looking so quiet and peaceful. This was the solution: He saw the camp spring suddenly into life, as a man came running in from the lone live-oak tree. He saw a number of horsemen riding from a narrow pass nearly opposite. He saw the warlike preparations on both sides; but his keenest glances could detect nothing of Fiery Fred and his outlaw band, though he felt assured that they were to play a prominent part in the coming drama.

He saw the "Indian surround," the headlong charge; and then he saw the Night Riders break cover and rush down and through the stream, holding their weapons high above their heads; he saw Fiery Fred at their head, and paused to see no more.

Throwing all disguises to the winds, Gospel George dashed down the slope, plunged through the waters and bounded forward to mingle in the bitter strife, his eyes fixed upon the white bandaged-head of his deadly foe.

CHAPTER XV.

BREAST TO BREAST.

ON thundered the horsemen, led by the Californian; on sped the reckless outlaws, with Fiery Fred at their head. The riders charging in stern silence, save for their rapidly detonating firearms, seemingly bent on riding directly over the little band of gold-hunters. The outlaws came yelling and screeching like veritable fiends or drunken lunatics, marking their every step with a pistol-shot, confident in their superior numbers, seemingly only anxious lest all should be ended before they could do their share of the bloody work.

Warned by the cry of alarm from Minnie Brady, Ned Allen realized the imminent peril at a single glance. And at the same time he saw that there was but one chance for them. The leaders of the two parties of assailants had miscalculated—or, had Fiery Fred "played sharp" with his ally, leaving him to encounter the first heavy shock? Be that as it may, Ned Allen eagerly seized his opportunity.

"Ready, boys!" he cried, in a clear tone. "Never mind those on foot—down with the horsemen! Don't let one of them come within arm's length—pick your men and fire!"

An irregular volley followed his words. Rifle and revolver spoke with terrible effect. The headlong charge was broken. Man and beast rolled over and over the ground in the agonies of death. Two men alone retained their saddles, seemingly unscathed by the storm of lead;

but their horses were well-nigh unmanageable, plunging and kicking, snorting with terror. One of the twain turned and fled—or perhaps 'twas only his horse, not fear. The other sprang to the ground, leaving his mustang to its own devices. At his clear, sonorous shout, three men arose beside him from the struggling mass, and followed him boldly as he charged upon the smoke-lined rifle-trench.

The young captain gave a wild cheer as he observed the effect of their volley, and bade his men turn their attention to the second party. His words were partially drowned by the devilish din, but he was instinctively obeyed, and revolver-barrels grew hot with the rapid discharges. But here the work was not so easy.

Fiery Fred, when unblinded by passion, was cool and clear-headed enough. His pride had not been wounded like that of Don Estevan, and he was too cunning to rush his men upon death in one close-packed mass, where even a random bullet would be almost sure of its victim. At a word his men scattered, leaping and dodging from side to side, in a regular Indian charge. There was rapid firing on both sides. Blood was drawn, more than one body fell with that heavy, leaden thud which, once heard, can never be mistaken. But the excitement was now too intense for such deliberate marksmanship as had annihilated the body of horse. Death was coming too nigh for that.

And then came the shock, breast to breast.

The eye can follow, the pen depict the varied evolutions of two contending armies, even when bayonet crosses bayonet; but as the numbers lessen the difficulty increases, until lucid description becomes an impossibility, as now. The rival bodies become one, blended together until the eye is confused and deceived.

With the first shock, the outlaws were hurled back in confusion; but this repulse was only momentary. They had tasted blood, and were not to be denied. The next instant they had closed and were struggling hand to hand, breast to breast, over the blood-stained trench. Then it was that each man lost his identity and became part of a horrible whole.

The two younger women, with the affrighted children, cowered trembling beneath the battered wagon, afraid to hide their eyes, yet fearing to look out upon that terrible scene.

The gray-haired mother knelt between her wounded husband and son, a hand touching each, but her eyes vainly seeking to follow her two sons who were in the thick of the fight.

And the deep, heavy stupor which had fallen over the patriarch began to disappear before the frightful uproar. His eyes opened, heavily, looking dull and glassy. The lean, wrinkled hand closed tighter around his horny fingers, but the mother's eyes were still with her sons. Only for that she would have noted the rapid change, would have seen the dull mist vanish, giving place to a fitful, lurid glow, while the sunken face seemed to fill out, the veins to swell with hot blood, and each relaxed muscle quiver and swell with renewed life.

With a sudden effort Jonathan Grey rose erect, the wife clinging to him with sudden terror. But he did not seem to hear her trembling words. His gaze rested upon the confused mass of raging combatants, and seemed confused, bewildered, like one in a dream. He made a step forward, as though he would join them; but his foot struck against the body of his wounded son. Mechanically he looked down. He saw the white, youthful face, from which his foot had dragged the blanket, and in that moment he remembered.

He flung the clinging hands from him. He stooped and grasped a heavy crowbar. He strode swiftly across the scant interval and joined in the *melee*.

The first man who encountered him face to face shrunk back with a little cry of terror. It was as though a dead man had confronted him. The ashen gray face, hard and fixed as stone, with no more expression than a graven image, save for the eyes. Deeply bloodshot, they resembled coals of living fire, so fiercely did they burn.

The outlaw saw this, but no more. The bar of iron descended, and he was hurled to the ground with skull shattered to the chin. And then the blood-dripping bar rose and fell, an inexorable, death-dealing machine, as the giant strode through the tangled mass, his cold, corpse-like face only lighted by those terrible, blazing eyes.

There was one other whose actions the eye could easily follow, and that was Gospel George. His first impulse was to plunge headlong into the *melee*, and there seek his prey. But a long life of peril and experience had learned him wisdom. He knew that one could follow no given trail across a raging flood, and that the wiseman kept within his own depth. His speed slackened and he paused while thirty paces from the trench, his eyes eagerly seeking for the still bandaged head of Fiery Fred. He caught a glimpse of it in the thick of the fight, and instantly fired.

A choking scream parted his lips as he saw the white head suddenly sink and disappear, and for the moment it seemed as though he must suffocate, so intense were his emotions. But

then his stout will reasserted itself, and, coolly as an experienced sportsman picking off grouse, as they rise, one by one, before his cunning dog, he chose his mark among the mass and sent the leaden missiles home with unerring precision.

It was at this point that Jonathan Grey entered the fight, and from that moment the tide began to turn.

The Night Riders missed the voice of their leader, and terribly thinned in numbers, their spirits began to quail. And then Gospel George capped the climax. He saw the signs of wavering, and sprang forward, yelling and shouting in a dozen different voices, calling upon an unlimited number of imaginary comrades to charge and surround the wretches—to murder, massacre them without mercy.

His advent was the last feather. Without another blow, the remaining outlaws broke and fled in utter confusion, unpursued. The victors themselves were in hardly better case, certainly were in no condition for following up their success.

Of them all, Gospel George alone sought to profit by the victory. As the outlaws broke, he turned and made all speed across the river, up the hill and down to where the Night Riders had left their animals. He tied their halters two and two, then mounted one horse, leading four others, and driving the remainder at a gallop down the narrow valley.

Jonathan Grey stood over the body of his last victim, leaning upon the crimsoned crowbar. The lurid glow was fading from his eyes. Mechanically his feet were spread further apart, and he leaned more heavily upon the bar.

His son, Jotham, wounded and breathless, but almost wild with exultation, now saw him for the first time since the fight began, and sprang to his side with a cry of wonder. The patriarch slowly turned his head at the touch of his son's hand, and a faint smile gradually relaxed his rigid features.

"We licked 'em—didn't we, boy?" he muttered, huskily, his limbs shaking beneath his weight. "But I'm—I'm feelin' mighty—sleepy, some—how!"

He seemed trying to throw off this feeling. He drew his huge frame erect, tossing back his leonine head as if in defiance; and then he fell heavily back, dead, in the arms of his eldest born.

A shrill yell, accompanied by the thunder of many hoofs, startled the heavy-hearted defenders, and each hand instinctively closed upon a weapon, as they glanced up from their sad work. But only one man appeared in view, and he was recognized as a friend. It was Gospel George, bestriding one horse and leading twenty others, all secured beyond the chance of escape.

Even his wild triumph was quieted by the scene, and his fantastic boasting was dropped for the moment. He dismounted and secured his prizes, then glided over to where the dead lay scattered around the trench, a dancing devil in his eyes.

The prospectors had already reckoned up their losses. Four of their little party had fallen, their earthly labors ended forever. Of the rest, but two had passed through the fiery ordeal unscathed—Ned Allen and Grumbling Dick Barnes. It was a heart-sickening record. Of their little party, only six now remained alive.

One by one Gospel George examined the dead, but in vain. The body he sought for was not there. Repeatedly he scrutinized each face, his own growing strangely hard and haggard as he began to realize his great mistake. Fiery Fred had indeed escaped, but how?

He heard Ned Allen utter a sharp cry, and felt a burning sensation across his face as he turned suddenly, with a loud report ringing in his ears. He saw a man fall back, a smoking revolver in his hand, and drawing a knife he sprang forward, but paused as he saw that the fellow had swooned. A wild hope was smothered soon as conceived, for he saw that the assassin was a stranger to him.

"I know him!" fiercely grated Zabbie, attracted by the shot. "Only fer him none o' this wouldn't 'a' bin! Out o' the way! If he's dead, I'll hev the satisfaction o' cuttin' him into fish-bait, enyhow! Stan' aside, thar!"

"The man is alive—you shall not murder him!" sternly cried Allen, interposing. "If he is the man you say, he shall be punished, but it must be in a white man's style, not like a butcher."

"I don't want to hurt you, stranger," panted the young savage. "You fit fer us like a major. But don't you come atween me an' my just revinge—don't you do it, now!"

"I call on you, friends," cried Allen. "Will you let foul murder be done here? Help me protect this man—"

"Jest say the word an' we'll chaw the young cat up," put in Grumbling Dick, showing his teeth.

"You must climb over me, too, then," and Jotham took his station beside his brother.

Knives were drawn and pistols were cocked. A bloody struggle seemed inevitable, when a startling interruption came, one that ended the situation like magic.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FAIR SUPPLIANT.

THROUGH the pass beyond the live-oak tree came a single rider, mounted upon a beautifully-spotted mustang, whose limbs were now stretched out at full speed. Across the level space, over the bloody rifle-trench at a single bound, nor drawing rein until so near that the little group instinctively parted and fell back on either side lest they should be ridden down, she came, pale and breathless as though from a long and hard race against time. Never before had Inez Mendoza looked so gloriously beautiful as when she sprang to the ground and crouched beside the prostrate form of her father, one hand upon his blood-stained breast, the other grasping a brightly-flashing knife.

"He is my father, gentlemen," she uttered, at length, as none of the party seemed inclined to break the silence. "I came for him—we will go away and never trouble you again. I am sorry if he has injured any of you—"

"I had a father an' four brothers when he fust come on us," interrupted Zabdiel Grey, in a strangely calm tone. "They's only us two, now. We can't fetch back the dead, but we kin take vengeance on the man as murdered 'em. Thar he lays. He belongs to us. Nobody kin take him away while we breathe. That is my say-so. An' yere we two stan', ready to make our words good, ag'in' one or ag'in' the hull crowd."

"You will gain no friends by insulting a lady," sternly interposed Ned Allen, stepping before Zabdiel Grey. "We can make some allowance for your losses; but are you the only sufferer? Keep your tongue within bounds, or it may run you into trouble. This is not the first time I have had to warn you—"

"Which nobody didn't ax you fer; mind that. You came without axin', an' ef you ain't suited with our ways o' doin' an' talkin', you kin go back the same trail as you come. We ax no help from nobody; nur we don't 'low nobody to come atween us an' our duty. Now you've got it!"

"He means murder—I can see it in his eyes!" cried the maiden, crouching closer as though she would shield her father with her own life. "Senor, I appeal to you. You look like an honest man. You will not permit my father to be assassinated?"

"I can promise you that," quickly replied Allen. "I am a stranger here, and do not understand all that has passed. But I can promise you justice, in the name of my comrades, as well. Will you trust me?"

The maiden looked full into his eyes, and there read his truth and honesty. She extended her hand, impulsively.

"I will trust you! Only—be merciful as well as just. He is my father—all I have to love on earth."

Ned Allen bowed without speaking. He did not dare trust his tongue just then, with those glorious eyes so near his own, and that warm clasp upon his hand.

Meanwhile, Jotham Grey had been conversing earnestly with his younger brother, whom he had drawn to one side. Apparently his arguments were not without effect, for Zabdiel grew calmer and more subdued.

Grumbling Dick Barnes, who possessed a slight spattering of surgical knowledge, was busied over the Californian, who was already recovering his senses. There was a long but not very deep knife-wound, slanting across his chest, two grazes from pistol-shots, and a severe bruise upon the head. Loss of blood had weakened him, but his injuries were by no means dangerous. Half an hour later the wounds were all bandaged as neatly as circumstances would admit. By this time, too, the Californian had heard enough to realize the full force of his situation, and though he appeared but little concerned as to the result, there was an occasional quiver of his lip, an uneasy expression in his half-closed eyes.

During Grumbling Dick's ministrations, Ned Allen had held a consultation with his comrades, in which the two brothers joined. Jotham—for Zabdiel scarcely opened his lips—firmly demanded that the prisoner be put upon trial; that the whole truth be told on both sides, and that, if he and his brother should prove their case, the assassin should be handed over to them for punishment in proportion to his crimes.

Though sorely perplexed—and Ned was honest enough to secretly admit that the case would have been far less complicated had Inez not appeared, or even if she had been less dazzlingly beautiful—Allen could not deny that the brothers had a right to demand this trial, and admitted as much. After that the preliminaries were quickly completed. Dick Barnes pronounced his patient fully able to stand his trial, and as no man could tell what another hour might bring forth, it was decided to lose no more time.

"But first," said Allen, setting the example by removing the weapons from his belt, and laying them at a little distance upon the ground. "Let every man do as I do. There have been hard words between us already, and there may be more before all is done. To save trouble let us leave all temptation."

Only Zabdiel made any objections, but a whispered word from Jotham subdued the young savage, and he quietly deposited his pistols, knife and rifle beside the other weapons.

Supported by his daughter, the Californian entered the little circle. In consideration of his weakness, he was permitted to rest himself upon a wooden bucket produced from the wagon for that purpose. Beside him stood his daughter, pale and anxious.

At a motion from Allen, Jotham Grey stepped forward and tersely narrated what had occurred from the moment of their entering the valley. He made no comments, attempted no rhetoric, but simply and strongly stated his case, then drew aside, after repeating his charge of deliberate and unprovoked murder against the prisoner.

But Zabdiel was not satisfied with this tame speech. He flung aside the restraining hand of his brother and confronted Allen.

"I've got jest one word to say. We kem here to look fer gold, jest as thousands o' others did. We found it by a accident. That man come an' swore it war his'n, an' talked to us like dogs. God made the gold free to all who could find it. We told him so, an' he rid away. What next? He steals upon us in the night. My brother war talkin' with his wife that war to be. He never gave us warnin', but up an' shot him like a dog, from the dark! Ef that ain't murder, then I'm a fool. The rest you know. That wasn't so bad. It war a fair fight, an' each man had to take his chances. But t'other war murder—black, foul murder! An' it calls for blood! Thar! I've said my say, an' I feel easier now."

"What have you to say in reply to these charges?" asked Allen of the Californian.

Don Estevan promptly arose, returning Zabdiel's look of hatred with a scornful smile.

"I had intended to keep silent," spoke the Californian in a cold, even tone; "but in justice to myself I must speak a few words—not to answer those men, but to set myself right with you gentlemen. I have been accused of playing the part of a midnight assassin. That assertion I brand as a lie. On that night I was at home, in my own house, as my daughter here can testify. What I have done I am ready to admit. This land—as far as the eye can reach—is my property, purchased by my father and bequeathed to me at his death. I can produce the original paper, can prove my identity—when asked to do so by those whom I can meet upon equal terms. I warned these persons. They laughed at me. I gave them time—four and twenty hours. Then I visited them here, and repeated the warning. Again they refused, and persisted in trespassing. Then I treated them as such. Only for you, gentlemen, I would have made my threats good. The rest you know. But, one word. You have espoused their cause, and made their quarrel yours. Now I warn you. This is my land. Go seek your gold elsewhere. You shall never succeed here. I have sworn it."

There was a momentary silence as the Californian ceased speaking, and which was broken by Inez, who earnestly corroborated the words of her father. He had been with her at the very time the murder was said to have been committed.

Allen whispered for a few moments with Harry Lane, who sat beside him, then stepped forward.

"There has been but one charge of murder, and I consider that the prisoner has shown himself wholly innocent of that crime. There has been much blood shed since, but all in fair fight, where life was pitted against life. I have lost five dear friends, and though I mourn their fate, I do not consider they were murdered. I move, then, that we allow this man to go free—on one condition. Let him pledge himself to make no further trouble, to leave us in peace to depart or remain as we choose, to restrain his followers from molesting us. We will be satisfied with his word of honor to observe these conditions sacredly. Have I spoken your thoughts, friends?"

Five men promptly responded ay, but the two brothers were sullenly silent. Their own words had even turned against them since they had acknowledged that only Eben had been assassinated. Then a stern glance of pleasure shot athwart their faces as the Californian spoke.

"You mean well, senor, but I decline to give that pledge. As long as I live, I will stand up for my rights. I have spoken. Now work your will."

"Wait!" said Inez as Allen was about to speak. "I will try and convince him that he is wrong. Give me one chance to save him—I implore you, upon my knees—see!"

Allen made a gesture of assent. He could not speak.

Gently Inez led her father aside, and then whispered rapidly in his ear. From beneath his long lashes the Californian shot a swift glance around. The spotted mustang whickered joyously and trotted up to its mistress. Had she made a signal, perceptible to it alone? If so, it promptly obeyed.

Zabdiel and Jotham, with cries of suspicion, started forward. But they were too late. As adroitly as though never injured, Don Estevan

sprung into the saddle and galloped swiftly away, with a shrill, mocking laugh.

Inez flung herself at full length across the pile of weapons, digging her fingers deep into the earth, the better to resist the angry grasp of the brothers. And it seemed as though she would succeed in her desperate plan, for the fugitive reached the live-oak tree ere she could be removed. But then—horse and rider fell heavily together, as a sharp report rung out from the bushes beyond.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRICE OF LIBERTY.

GOSPEL GEORGE was like one stunned, stupefied, when his closest search failed to discover any trace of his hated enemy, Fiery Fred. He had seen the man fall at the report of his pistol, and had such implicit faith in his hand and eye that he gave his undivided attention to the remaining Night Riders. And yet, surely he would have noticed the outlaw chieftain had he fled with his surviving bandits. It was an enigma to him, and came upon him like a thunder-clap, for the moment completely unnerving him. But this was of brief duration. His indomitable spirit reasserted itself. There was yet a chance. The outlaw surely was hurt—perhaps severely. He might still be overtaken ere he could reach his retreat.

With this hope growing in his heart and obliterating all other considerations, Gospel George struck off along the trail followed by the majority of the fugitives. Despite his almost frantic energy, the old man was not working blindly nor at random. He reasoned that Fiery Fred would make the best of his way to his mountain retreat, where he could laugh at his enemies, with as little loss of time as possible, and of course would take the nearest practicable route. Taking a wide circuit, Gospel George closely scrutinized the ground, carefully measuring every track; and finally his search was rewarded. The black frown deepened upon his face as he followed the trail for several hundred yards. The regularity of the footsteps, the length of stride, spoke only too plainly to his eyes. He knew that Fiery Fred had escaped the fight almost if not quite unscathed.

"The devil stan's by his own, but will it al'ays be so? No, I can't believe that; ef I did, I'd die cussin' heaven an' airth an' all thar is in them. My time 'll come soon. It must! I'm on his trail an' I'll never leave it ag'in ontel it comes to a flat end fer the one or both on 'us. Don't be oneasy, old man. I'm a-comin', never fear! Ef I turn my back fer a minnit, it's onldy to git a better ready."

He looked to his weapons, and found that only the little revolver taken from Paquita remained loaded. He had no other ammunition, no food, nothing in which to carry water. It would be rank folly for him to start along the trail so poorly provided for its vicissitudes, and, though reluctantly, he retraced his steps toward the camp beside the lake.

While still within the line of bushes he suddenly halted. He could see the little group beside the trench. He saw the Californian leap upon the mustang; saw the intrepid action of the young woman, and from the excited cries and gestures of the gold-hunters, had little difficulty in riddling the whole affair. Though ignorant of the prisoner's identity, he resolved to frustrate the attempted escape, and without moving from his tracks he awaited the fugitive's approach.

Not twenty paces separated them when Gospel George raised his pistol and fired. Pierced through the brain, the spotted mustang plunged headlong to the ground, casting its rider violently from the saddle. Gospel George bounded catlike to his side, but his haste was unnecessary; Don Estevan lay stunned and senseless. He had been looking back over his shoulder, with a scornful laugh at his outwitted enemies, when the ambushed shot was fired, else so practiced a horseman would have escaped the fall easier. Satisfied that he was not seriously injured, Gospel George rose erect and beckoned to the astonished prospectors, with a loud cry.

The two brothers reached him first, and their outspoken, ferocious joy was in broad contrast to the uneasy silence of Ned Allen. Had the latter opened his whole heart, his comrades would have been not a little astonished.

"Thar's your meat, gentlemen, ef you want anythin' of him. Ef I didn't do right in stoppin' of him, I'm ready to 'cept his 'pology," grinned Gospel George.

"You'd better be gittin' your own 'pology ready," bluntly retorted Grumbling Dick. "A hoss-thief is mean enough, but when a two-legged critter gits low down enough to steal mules—"

"Easy, stranger—jess b'ar in mind, ef you please, that my Roxy Ann is of the she-mule persuasion. I'd rather eat coyote hash fer a livin' then to hear any o' her 'lations 'bused by them as hain't made the sect a study like this chicken hes. A mule, feller-citizens, is a livin' monument o'—"

"We'll take your word for it, old man," bluntly interposed Allen. "Just now we have more important business on hand than—"

"Listening to a feller praisin' up his own family," grinned Barnes, parenthetically.

"Drop that, Dick—this is no time for nonsense. Catch hold and help carry the prisoner back to camp. And you, stranger, keep with us. I don't doubt but you can explain everything satisfactorily; at least I sincerely trust so."

"I kin explain anythin' short of a woman," coolly responded Gospel George, as he followed the little party on to camp.

Inez, trembling like a leaf, met them half-way, sobbing pitifully over her parent, whom she believed dead. Allen sought to comfort her, but with little success, until the rude restoratives—whisky and cold water from the lake—freely used by Grumbling Dick, restored the Californian's senses.

The sudden and unexpected reverse, when he felt freedom in his very grasp, was not without its effect upon Don Estevan, and his proud spirit was perceptibly shaken. Ned Allen wisely left him alone with Inez, after she had been disarmed and his limbs bound, believing that her entreaties would have more effect upon him than any threats.

Meanwhile Gospel George, if not accused, had rather sharply been requested to explain his part in the recent night's work when the prospectors were left afoot in the mountains, and as to his movements since. He met the queries in good part, feeling that, considering all circumstances, the prospectors had fair cause for suspecting him to have been in league with the horse-thief. In his own peculiar style, he gave his explanation, yet with a clearness and candor that carried conviction to the hearts of his hearers. He recalled his suspicions of the pretended Sorrel-top, of his secret watch and of what followed. Of his following the trail, of the ambush, the capture, his vain attempt at escape, of the interview with Fiery Fred and all that ensued, concealing nothing save his own mission of vengeance.

"An' now you've got the hull re-cord," he added, quietly. "I follered them here. I saw somebody—I didn't know 'twas you fellers until it was all over—was in a pesky tight box, an' so I jest sailed in fer all that was out. I reckon I killed nigh a hunderd o' the imps afore they pucked. I'd 'a' wiped out the hull lot, only I didn't like to act the hog. They skeedaddled, an' so did I—fer the hoss-critters. Yonder they be; fa'r-lookin' animiles, too. Ef you fellers like, they're your'n. Turn about's fa'r play; Fiery Fred tuck your mules; now you kin take his hosses."

"But you captured them—"

"An' I give 'em to you fellers, fer thinkin' me a hoss-thief an' ornary dead-beat besides," grinned Gospel George. "Ef they was mules, now! No, boys; thar they stan'. Take 'em or leave 'em; I don't keer a busted cap either way. They's only one four-legged critter fer me—an' that's Roxy Ann! Ef I can't git her, I don't want no other. I'm goin' to hev her, gentlemen, ur bu'st somethin' wide open—you hear me?"

At this moment Inez left her parent's side and slowly, timidly approached Ned Allen. It was with evident difficulty that she spoke:

"You offered him—my father, senior—you offered him terms, which he refused. He sees clearer now, and would accept, if he could be assured—"

"I am very glad, for your sake, lady," hastily uttered Ned, and he managed to squeeze her little paw, with a good deal of feeling. "God knows, there has been enough bloodshed already; and if he will pledge us his sacred honor—"

"Just wait one minnit, stranger," bluntly interrupted Zabdiel Grey. "I want you an' the hull crowd to hear a few words I've got to say to the—the pris'ner, afore he binds hisself to anythin'. 'Twon't take long."

The young savage turned and strode to the Californian's side, standing in silence until the others gathered around. Then, in a low, passionless voice, he spoke:

"I ax your pardon fer callin' you a murderer, a bit sence. You're a whiter man than I thought you. But thar's blood on your han's. My father an' two o' my brothers is dead—an one man is a-dyin'. Only fer you they would all be alive now. I'm only a boy, but I give you this warnin'. After this hour, to-morrow, look out fer yourself. I'm goin' fer yer skelp. An' when I take the trail, the one or t'other o' us two hev got to die, afore I know rest or peace. Look at me well, an' b'ar my words in mind. This airth ain't big enough fer us both. You must kill me or I'll kill you, sure es thar's a God in Heaven!"

There was a brief silence as the young man who had proclaimed himself the avenger of the dead, turned away. Then the Californian spoke. He pledged his sacred honor not to molest the gold-hunters in any way, shape or form, nor to allow any of his followers to injure them. And as he ended, he nodded to Inez. She produced a small cross from her bosom and held it to his lips.

Ned Allen stooped and severed his bonds, assisting him to arise, saying:

"You are at liberty, senior, to go where you

choose. If we cannot forget the unfortunate past, at least let us keep it from our lips."

He hastened to where the captured horses were still standing, and selected three, releasing them from the rest. Upon one he placed the saddle taken from the spotted mustang. At first the Californian refused the animals, but as he attempted to walk proudly away, he was forced to acknowledge his injuries. Allen assisted them both to mount, then sprung upon the third animal, saying:

"I will ride a little distance with you, senior."

"There is no need," was the rather sharp reply.

"Pardon me," persisted Allen. "You are severely injured. The effort may be too much for you, and then you would need a stronger arm than that of your daughter."

The two rode on in perfect silence, for several miles; then, seeing that Don Estevan bore up quite stoutly, Allen wished them a safe ride and drew rein. When nearly two hundred yards separated them, Inez suddenly wheeled and galloped back to his side, whispering in an agitated tone:

"I must see you again—at this spot, to-morrow morning!"

Then she galloped rapidly after her father.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ABRUPT AWAKENING.

HE young gold-hunter sat like one in a maze, staring after the rapidly receding figure of the fair rider, scarce venturing to breathe until she, accompanied by her father, disappeared from view around an envious point of rock. And even then it was some little time before his nerves regained their customary steadiness, or the dancing mist cleared from before his eyes, and he could reflect with tolerable calmness upon what had really occurred.

From his first glance, Ned Allen had been strongly attracted by, and interested in, the fair Californian, not altogether by her rich, almost Oriental beauty, but also through her actions during the trial of her parent. Still, though deeply impressed, there is little doubt but Ned would have parted with Inez that evening, and have returned to his duties at camp without more than a passing thought of admiration, and never have suspected how narrowly he had escaped falling in love at first sight, had not Inez returned to his side with the whispered words already recorded.

It was not so much the words themselves as the tone in which they were spoken, the richly beautiful face bending so close to his that he could feel the soft, warm breath upon his cheek, while those wondrously bright, speaking eyes seemed to look down into his very heart, setting his young blood afire, sending it coursing through each vein until he tingled and quivered and "felt all over in spots," as he, himself, would have expressed the peculiar sensation.

"I'll do it—if it kills me!" he muttered, at length, wrenching around his horse's head, and retracing his steps toward camp. "If I only had some decent clothes!"

Poor Ned! That one last glance, brief though it was, had hit him hard, indeed. He forgot all else, for the moment, allowing his horse to pick its own way, nor noticed that the animal had veered from the direct course to the golden valley, and was pacing rapidly along an unknown trail to its present master; a course that would, if pursued, lead them direct to the mountain retreat of Fiery Fred and his satellites.

But then came an interruption, sudden, sharp, and startling enough, though for the moment he could scarcely define it. A shock, a scrambling plunge of his horse and then a fall, where, more by instinct than any conscious effort on his part, Ned alighted on his feet, clear of the convulsive plunging of his prostrate steed. A musket-shot seemed ringing in his ears, and there came a hoarse shout of vindictive rage. In the red light of the setting sun he could distinguish several dark figures hastily descending the rock-strewn hill, yelling and gesticulating in a manner that could not be misinterpreted. The truth instantly became plain to his mind. He had been watched and ambushed, doubtless by a portion of the band so recently defeated by the gold-hunters. His horse had stepped with one hind foot on a loose stone, slipping and flinging up his head in the vain endeavor to keep from falling. Thus its brain received the leaden missile which would otherwise have claimed a nobler victim.

In that brief moment the young gold-hunter realized the extremity of his peril, and with a celerity born of it, sprung behind the closest cover, which proved to be a boulder barely large enough to shield his person. Another instant and his revolver was speaking venomously, and, like magic, the enemy disappeared from view, sinking behind the boulders lying conveniently near.

The reverberating echoes died away, and in the deathlike silence that ensued, Ned Allen had an opportunity to realize his position, to sum up the chances for and against him. The prospect was not reassuring. The odds were against him, four to one, and they also had the advantage of position. The boulders and frag-

ments of rock lay thickly around them. It would be mere child's play for them to steal from one to another of these coverts, so quickly that a bead could not be drawn upon them. The men in front could easily prevent the miner from shifting his position, while their comrades could as easily flank him, since twenty-five yards on either hand would expose him fully to their fire arms.

Thus far had Ned Allen summed up the chances, pro and con, when he heard himself hailed from the front in a cool, jeering tone of voice.

"You mought as well come out, young feller. We've got the under-grip onto ye, an' they ain't a mite o' use in kickin'. Throw down your weepins an' mebbe we'll let you off the easier fer it."

"If you want them so bad, better come and take them," retorted Ned, keeping a keen lookout upon first one side and then the other. "I helped to lick you once, and I'm just man enough to do it again on my own hook. Put that in your pipe, stranger!"

"Take your own way, boss. I was jest speakin' fer your own good. Ef you'd rather be salted down thar like a hog in a pen, good enough; you shall have your wish in jest five minutes. But you fit like a major over yonder, an' I sorter 'lowed you'd rather go under man-fashion."

"Thank you for nothing!" laughed Allen, though, it must be confessed, he felt anything but hilarious. "I reckon I'll stand the racket where I am."

His last words were blended with the report of his pistol, as he caught a momentary glimpse of a dark figure among the rocks. But a jeering laugh told him that his bullet had been wasted. And then his shot was echoed back from the other flank.

He felt a stinging shock, and fell backward with an angry cry, clasping both hands over his face. It seemed as though the bullet had seared both his eyeballs, the pain was so intense. Yet, despite this, he heard the wild yells of vindictive triumph, heard the heavy feet slipping and sliding among the loose slate, and knew that the outlaws were crowding forward to complete their work. Instinctively he arose and mechanically groped around for his pistol. But his eyes were sightless.

He heard a wild, shrill shout, mingling with a rifle-shot; and then what seemed to be the voices of a dozen different men, uttering horrible threats, strung together with oaths and curses, screeches and other outlandish noises, enough to raise the dead.

He brushed one hand across his smarting eyes, and the bloody mist seemed to partially clear away. He caught a glimpse of a tall figure bounding toward him, and drew his knife with the desperation of despair. But the figure halted beyond arm's-length, and exclaimed, admiringly:

"Ef he don't want to fight the old man too, I'm a liar! Good Lawd! boy, hain't ye got a plenty to do ye fer awhile?"

"Gospel George!"

"Tain't nobody else, honey! Did ye think I was gwine to let ye hev all the fun? Not muchly! I jest let ye git a mouthful, an' then I waded in heavy. Did ye hear any brass band? I reckon them critters thought a hull eternal rijiment war comin' to jine in the funeral! I jest let myself loose. I lit out right an' left, up an' down, tooth an' toe-nail, an' jest nat'rally chawed up the hull dog-goned outfit—"

"You killed them—"

"Not all. Ef I've got a failin'—an' mind ye, honey, I don't lay claim to bein' parfact—ef I've got a failin', it's that o' bein' too marcfail to them what don't deserve it. I jest laid out twenty-three on 'em, booted t'others all round an' sent 'em bug-huntin' fer—ge-thunder! why didn't you tell a fellow you was killed!" he cried, as Allen stumbled over a stone and fell to the ground.

With wonderful gentleness the rough old hunter examined the young man's injuries, with a sigh of relief as he found them so trivial. The outlaw's bullet had flattened against the boulder behind which Allen was crouching, filling his face with bits of lead and splinters of rock, stunning him for the moment, but working him no injury beyond a few scratches and a temporary loss of sight. Yet the old man held his tongue until he had cleared away the blood and dust, and bathed Ned's eyes with water from his canteen.

"Thar! you'll be all right by mornin'. 'Tain't like it was with me, oncet. Was goin' to buy a keg o' powder. Didn't like its looks, much, an' like a fool I stooped down to smell of it. I was smokin' a see-gar, too. That's one time I was fooled, bad. The powder was good—I never see a keg go off quicker'n that did! 'Twas nigh a week afore I got the smoke fairly outen my eyes—fact!"

"I don't see—" muttered Allen, still confused, gazing around him. "You said you killed—"

"Could 'a' done it, honey; don't make no mistakes," interposed Gospel George, reprovingly. "Give all sinners time to 'pent o' thar evil doin's—them's my motto. I jest marked 'em. I made 'em toe a line an' putt a ragged bullet through thar years. That's one o' my secrets. When a critter gits shot thar, they're bound to

"pent; they jest gives all they've got to the poor, an' then goes an' grows up into parsons an' lawyers an' sich like. I reckon I've made nigh a thousand."

"There is one—look!" cried Allen, pointing to where a dusky figure was leaning against a bowlder. "He is not dead yet!"

"He soon will be, then," said Gospel George, in a voice that sounded strangely cold and stern after his rollicking talk, as he strode forward and stooped over the dying wretch. "Look up, Eph. Perkins. Look me square in the eye an' see ef you kin remember who I be."

"Hamilton!" gasped the outlaw.

"Him as was George Hamilton afore you an' your mates made me what I be. I swore the death-hunt on ye then, an' I've kep' my word."

With a grating curse the dying wretch thrust a revolver fairly against the avenger's breast, and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GLIMPSE OF THE HIDDEN PAGE.

It seemed as though the outlaw would be avenged, even in death. His cocked and loaded revolver was pressed hard against the breast of his ruthless destroyer. His hand was steady, his finger still strong enough to release the hammer. And with a fierce, grating curse, he pulled the trigger.

Never before in all his eventful life had Gospel George stood nigher death's door than at that moment. The desperate action of the dying man took him completely by surprise, and before he could recover, or make a single motion of self-defense, the weapon exploded, he whirled half-way round, falling upon the frost-eaten bowlder beside the outlaw.

But only for an instant; then he sprung to his feet with clubbed rifle, an angry devil glaring in his eyes, his face distorted, almost hideous with rage.

"Don't—he's dead!" interposed Ned Allen, with uplifted hand. "He died even as he pulled the trigger."

"I might 'a' knowed it!" muttered Gospel George, with a long breath. "They wasn't a slipper varmint in ten States then him. He'd slip up ahind an' pizenly bite ye in the heel, but when you went to look fer him, durned ef he'd ever bin within a month's ride o' ye. You couldn't calc'late on him no more then on a mule—leavin' out my Roxy Ann. I tell you, honey, the likes o' that critter—"

"Man alive! You're on fire!" exclaimed Ned, as a curl of pungent smoke arose from the old man's side, then breaking into a tiny flame.

"Waal, I *did* think the weather was growin' most uncommonly warm, all in one spot," coolly remarked George, as he crushed out the flame with his horny palm, upon which Ned Allen now caught sight of fresh blood-stains.

"You are hurt—that scoundrel did shoot you!"

"Jest barked the skin, I reckon; 'tain't nothin' to make a fuss over, though what it mought 'a' bin ef it hadn't bin fer *you*, young feller—" and the rugged voice suddenly softened. "I ain't one o' them as says much—talkin' never came nat'ral to me sence the time when I was tongue-tied, hed the lockjaw an' the mumps all to oncet—but this much I will say: ondy fer *you* I'd be crow's bait this minnit, an' I thank you, plum from the bottom o' my heart—I do so! Not that I hold myself o' so much a'count, but I've got a bit o' work yit as I must do up brown afore ever I kin rest easy onder the ground."

"You did more than that for me. It was only an instinctive motion on my part, knocking aside his pistol—"

"Instink is a good thing—an' ef you want to see it to perfection, you'd orter jest set down some time when you hain't got nothin' else to do, an' study instink in my Roxy Ann. I tell you, boss, that 'ar animile is chuck fuller o' instink then this car'on was o' nat'ral cussedness."

"You knew him, then? I heard him call you—"

"Hamilton—which goes to show my name is somethin' else," quickly interposed Gospel George. "He never told the truth but oncet in his life, an' that mighty nigh killed him—he ondy got over it 'cause he was dead drunk at the time. Thar; let him rest. He was so pizen mean livin' that the wolves won't tetch him now he's dead; ef they do, so much the wuss fer them!"

"Which way are you going?" asked Allen, after a puzzled glance around him.

"Back to camp, I reckon. I sot out in sech a hurry that I forgot some things."

"I'm glad of that, for to tell the truth, I am completely bewildered. I can't think how I lost the back trail."

"I kin—jest as *easy*!" grinned Gospel George. "Bless ye, boss, men-critters is all the same way, one time in thar lives. A bright black eye, a purty little mouth an' other things a'cordin'—they never was more confustratin' things then them 'ar. They was a time—'twas when I fust saw Roxy Ann—I was so dead struck an' clean gone that I lost myself tee-totally. An' I reckon I'd bin lost it, eadly I raised a hull regiment

o' men-critters an' we hunted over seventeen States ontel I was found—it's a scan'alous fact! The scrapes I've done got into 'long o' that blessed critter would make a stone monkey weep tears o' sorrow an' bitterness bigger'n a pun-kin! It'd make the most affectionist story of somebody was ondy smart enough to tell it clean through. They don't grow smart enough men nowadays to do jestice to sech a gelorious subject—no, sir!"

Gospel George spoke rapidly and in sharp contrast to his usual careless drawl, and cast more than one stealthy glance at the face of his taciturn companion. Ned Allen was thinking deeply, and his thoughts were of Gospel George. Who and what was he? For one moment he had seen the veil of secrecy lifted. What was the truth hidden beneath it? As he thought thus, he looked up and met the eyes of Gospel George; eyes no longer twinkling and sparkling with rare good-humor, but cold and glittering like polished steel.

"Better not," he uttered, slowly. "Thar's things as won't b'ar rakin' up. You've see'd one side o' me, the best side, mebbe; an' ef that suits you, good enough. Ef not—ef you ain't satisfied, then the sooner we say good-by the better it'll be fer the both o' us. Thar is a secret I don't deny; but the shame of it don't rest on me. Ef you're content to take me es I be, thar's my paw—an' it's the hand of a man as never yit knowin'ly failed fri'nd or enemy—"

"Your secret is your own," cried Allen, warmly grasping the proffered hand. "I will never seek to pry into it, or to know more than I do now, until you yourself give me free permission."

"I'd like to tell you, boss—I would so. Ondly—you kin make allowance fer female contrariness—I reckon Roxy Ann would kick ag'in it. She's of the most jealousyest dispersition you never saw. Ef I happen to sneeze without fust axin' her, hope may die ef she'll speak to me fer a hull week!"

Ned made no reply, and Gospel George dilated at length upon the subject of the lovely Roxy Ann, nor did his eulogium come to an end until the valley wherein the remainder of the gold-seekers were encamped was reached.

The scene was a mournful one. The dead lay still in a ghastly row, awaiting the dawn of day for burial. Beside the shattered wagon was the Grey family, living and dead. Side by side lay the dead, the father and two sons. Sobbing as though her poor heart would break, little Minnie Brady crouched beside the cold body of her lover, resisting the efforts of Jotham's wife to draw her away. The mother, pale, haggard and sunken-eyed, bent over the wounded Malachi, moistening his fevered lips, watching the feeble remnant of life that seemed ebbing slowly but surely. Nodding heavily over the fire was Jotham, while near by sat Zabdiel, carefully cleaning his rifle, his face hard-set and rigid, his eyes alone betraying the dark and deadly passions which raged at his heart.

Sick at heart, Ned Allen turned aside. He saw that two men were upon guard, and that Harry Lane had made all necessary arrangements for the night.

"It's a black look-out, boss," muttered Gospel George, joining him. "I glory in your spunk in stickin' it out here, but I do wish them wimmen critters was in a safer place. It ain't no fool you're buckin' ag'in, in Fiery Fred. Long as he's alive an' kickin' he won't let you hev time to fergit him. You wouldn't like to play sharp, an' send back fer enough men to clean his gang out?"

"No," firmly replied Allen. "Let this news get wind, and we would be overrun by thousands but little better. The discovery is ours, and we shall profit by it alone, even though we have to handle pickax with one hand and revolver with the other."

"I won't say you ain't right," thoughtfully responded Gospel George. "An' I fer one I'll stick by ye to the last. Ondly—I must be free to come an' go as I like. Mind, I don't ax no share in the gold. It's mighty little I need, an' that I know whar to put hands on."

"You're going after *him*?" inquired Allen.

"No—after *her*, after Roxy Ann. An' you mark my words, boss, I don't come back without that same angeliferous critter, nuther! I jest come here to pack up some grab, sence I may hev to lay close an' do some tall snakin' afore I kin git her. It's like they'll guard her like she was made o'—"

"Look yonder!" suddenly exclaimed Allen, pointing up the mountain. "A fire—two of them!"

"An' thar—three, four! thar's music in the air, an' Fiery Fred, he's head fiddler! Thar's meanin' in them lights—they're talkin' mighty loud, jest now. Ef I ondy knowed how to read what they say—an' I'll find out or bu'st somethin'! You fellers here must keep your eyes skinned. Putt out all the fires, lay close an' wait ontel you hear from me."

Without awaiting a reply, Gospel George trailed his rifle and started off at a long, swinging lope. And, after looking to their arms, the gold-hunters extinguished their fires and awaited the result of the storm which seemed brewing.

On leaden wings the hours crept by. One by one the signal-fires died away and disappeared from view.

Ned Allen sat alone, his heart heavy, his thoughts bitter indeed. At that moment it seemed that all the sorrow, the heart-sickening grief which would follow the telling of that day's tragedy, rested upon his head alone. Only for his advice and leadership each of these five dead boys might now be alive and well; and a bitter groan broke from his aching heart.

Then he sprung to his feet, in common with each of the other listeners. From far away came the sounds of firearms, of faint, indistinct yells; then all was still again, save for the murmuring of the flowing waters, the moaning sound of the evening breeze among the juniper shrubs and rugged rocks.

"Can it be that he has run his head into danger?" at length whispered Harry Lane.

"God have mercy upon his soul!" solemnly uttered Allen, burying his face in his hands. "The curse of God is resting upon me, and, through me, upon us one and all!"

CHAPTER XX.

GOLDEN VISIONS.

THE day dawned, clear and radiant, and with it came reviving hope to those of the gold-hunters who had thus far passed through the trying ordeal unharmed. But to the others the dawning light only brought their terrible loss nearer to heart. A few more hours, and then the last parting—only the memory of the dead would be left them.

The day found Ned Allen looking haggard and sadly worn. The intense excitement of the past few days, the loss of rest, the deep grief which he had felt for one and all of his slaughtered comrades, had shattered his nerves and almost broken his will. It seemed almost as though his life was accursed, and, through him, all those who were connected with him.

Harry Lane, taciturn, sensible fellow, had kept close to his friend since that wild outbreak of the past night, and, though not a word had passed between them, his silent sympathy was not without its salutary effect. And as the chances of an attack from Fiery Fred grew less with the brightening dawn, he kindled a fire and fried some bacon while the coffee was boiling and the bread cooking. Almost mechanically Ned Allen ate and drank, and Harry Lane had his reward as he saw the heavy gloom gradually fade away and the young adventurer grow more like his usual self. Not until then did he speak.

"I'm glad you're looking better, old fellow. I was afraid you were in for a sick spell, and goodness knows how we could spare you now—I don't! There's so much to do," he added, with a sad glance toward the row of lifeless clay.

"It was thinking of *them*—and of those at home," muttered Allen, loosening the collar at his throat as though he was choking. "To think of them, watching, longing and waiting for tidings from—from the boys, and they lying there, dead! And knowing that only for me they would still be alive and well—I! Harry, only for the poor old mother at home, I could wish that those devils had killed me, too!"

"Your stomach's out of order—that's what's the matter with you," said matter-of-fact Harry. "That's all nonsense, man. You are no more to blame than the man in the moon! Their fate was written down at their birth, and they must have met it even had you never been born. Come, brace up and be a man. Remember, we have their deaths to avenge, their interests to look after, besides our own."

Allen was visibly comforted by the words of his friend. A man does not analyze too closely when he is in real need of consolation.

Alfred Picard, the only one of the prospectors who was too seriously injured to labor, was placed in a favorable position for keeping a close look-out upon every hand, with a revolver close to his hand, while the others, seven in all, with Jotham and his brother Zabdiel, proceeded with their tools to the lone tree, of which mention has been so often made. In silence they worked until a long trench, some four feet in depth had been excavated. The pit was lined with leaves and grass, upon which the dead were gently lowered one by one. Pale and seemingly hard as a stone, Mrs. Grey supported the fainting figure of Minnie through the ordeal, and when the last corpse was lowered to its place, and the mourners paused with an uneasy sense of embarrassment, all wishing the painful scene over, yet not knowing how to end it, her voice rose, full and solemn, in a fervent prayer for the rest and repose of the dead.

And then, after a brief pause, she sung one verse of one of those old Methodist hymns, that sound so mournful, almost wailing. No other voice joined hers. Not one was able, and the only dry eyes in the little group belonged to young Zabdiel, as he stared steadily toward the gap through which he had caught the last glimpse of the enemy upon whom he had sworn the death-hunt.

Mrs. Grey led Minnie away from the grave, and then the last office was fulfilled, the earth shoveled and tramped down over the dead.

With a motion for the others to follow him, Ned Allen strode silently along until he reached the little stream just where it began to spread out into the lake.

"I don't mean to bore you with a long speech, boys," he said, smiling faintly as he saw them awaiting his words. "You know the agreement we came to before—that last fight. Of course it holds good now, though we are so few in number. We will not be driven from our rights. We will work together as a band of brothers, share and share alike, keeping faith with the dead. There may be much, there may be little gold here, but whatever we make must be divided as we agreed."

"You must leave out me, stranger," quietly interposed Zabdriel Grey. "I can't bind myself to nothin' tell my work's done. You hear what I told him. At jest the minnit—I've got the sunmark by the wagon, yender—at jest the minnit I take the trail. An' you must look out fer the wimmin-folk, Jotham. I won't come back ontel I kin show his skelp to make good my words."

"You must not break the truce between us—we will have our hands full with Fiery Fred and his gang. Remember your mother—"

"I remember my brothers and pap, stranger. They ain't no truce atween him an' me. I give him warnin'. An' I give you warnin', too; the man as tries to stop me 'll chaw a ragged bullet," was the dogged reply, and then the young savage moved slowly away.

"He'll do jest what he says," spoke Jotham. "He al'ays was a hot, bull-headed, contrary cub."

Allen bit his lip, but dropped the matter for the time being. He spoke further, like one who had weighed the subject well, and had formed his plans from beginning to end. He, with one companion, must go and scout around the vicinity where they had seen the signal-fires, to discover, if possible, what had befallen Gospel George. The remainder, with one exception, who was to act as look-out to guard against surprise, were to prospect the stream and valley as thoroughly as possible, with an eye to the best locations for claims, in case other prospectors should stumble upon them.

"No, Harry," he added, as Lane volunteered to accompany him. "You have the clearest head of us all, and must stay here. And mind," he added in a low tone, "keep your wits clear and your eyes open. If the boys make a big find they will forget everything else unless you keep them in hand."

Allen chose Dick Barnes to accompany him, as being the keenest-eyed and best trailer, which compliment so mollified Dick that he forgot to grumble at being detained from hunting gold. Together they crossed the neck of the lake and scaled the steep hillside, heading for the point where, as nearly as they could guess, the first signal light had been seen.

Meanwhile, all was excitement among the gold-hunters. Under Harry Lane's directions, they procured pans, picks and shovels, and began testing the sands along the lake shore. Eagerly, breathlessly was the washing of the first pan of soil watched, with quicker breathing as the first yellow gleam was seen amid the deftly-whirled water, culminating in a subdued cry of exultation as nearly a teaspoonful of the precious metal, mixed with black sand, rewarded the brief toil. Fully a dozen different points were tried, with nearly an equal degree of success, until it was proven without doubt that the placer was one of almost inexhaustible richness, that they had literally discovered a valley of gold!

And yet, after the first burst of exultation, they were not satisfied! True, gold there was, in marvelous plenty, but it was all in dust; not even a "bean," much less a nugget, among it. The lump so strangely found by Jonathan Grey still filled their eyes. Surely there must be more where that came from? And then arose the cry:

"To the river—to the foot of the fall!"

In vain Harry Lane recalled Allen's caution, and reminded them that even the watchful eyes of relentless foes might be upon them, ready to take advantage of their carelessness; but to no avail. The golden serpent had bitten them, changing their blood to quicksilver. Throwing caution to the winds, they rushed down to the stream and plunged into it, waist deep, scraping the bottom with their feet or sinking down and groping for the coveted nuggets with their hands. Harry Lane did not join them, but stood upon the shore, weapons ready for use, since the chosen guard had abandoned his post to join in the mad search for gold.

For a time the quest was without reward, and Harry began to hope that the immersion in almost ice-cold water would cool the fever, when Jotham Grey arose from the mud, with a yell of triumph, holding up a nugget of gold nearly the size and shape of a hen's egg! There was an instant rush toward him—an eagerness that seemed like positive violence, and he floundered through the water to land, making for the pile of weapons with eyes all aglow. But, Harry Lane was equal to the emergency, and stepping between the men, he recalled the agreement that all the gold found was to be common prop-

erty until the time came for equal division. After a moment's hesitation Jotham handed him the nugget and again plunged into the stream.

This discovery but added to the fuel, and Harry knew that there was no chance of the men's quieting down to rational work until their strength should be utterly exhausted.

Then, disgusted with his lack of success, fiery Tom Weston scrambled to shore, and running along the bank, took "a header" with a reckless disregard of hidden rocks, right into the foot of the fall. In another moment his head reappeared, with a half-choked cry, only to sink again. In alarm Harry ran to the spot, but ere he could jump in to the rescue, Tom reappeared lower down, where there was firmer footing, holding both hands above his head, a golden nugget in each!

The scene which follows beggars description. Like confirmed lunatics the men plunged into the basin hollowed out by the falling waters, returning with one or two nuggets, or else with empty hands, only to repeat the process with scarce a moment for breath. And steadily grew the golden pile at Harry Lane's feet, until he, too, began to feel the yellow fever in its worst form, and grew so eager that he was only awakened by the voice of Ned Allen on his return from scouting.

"What news?" he asked, more to cover his confusion than aught else.

"The very worst," sadly replied Allen. "Gospel George is dead—he was murdered last night, when we heard those shots—when trying to serve us."

CHAPTER XXI.

GOSPEL GEORGE ON DUTY.

THOUGH Gospel George so promptly took upon himself the duty of solving the meaning of the signal fires upon the mountain, and started off in such haste, he was not one to run blindly into danger through lack of proper precautions. Both from report and experience he knew that Fiery Fred was as shrewd and clear-witted as he was relentless; and fully believing that the signal-lights were of his contrivance, he thoroughly appreciated the wisdom of prudence, since he could expect scant mercy in case he should again fall into the outlaw's power.

"Not that I'd keer overly much, ef ondy I could get one squar' up an' down lick at him—only one. I wouldn't ax no more!" muttered the old man, pausing upon the brow of the hill where the reader first met the Grey family. "I've waited long—a monstrous long time; everything 'pears to set dead ag'inst me, so fur. But the time 'll come—it must come! an' then I don't much keer what follers."

Suddenly he sunk flat behind a bowlder, lying motionless as the stone itself for a full minute. There was a faint, rustling noise before him, so faint that few ears could have distinguished it. An instant later a mountain hare slowly hopped past his covert. Gospel George arose with a faint laugh.

"Skeered of a cotton-tail! I'm dub'ous I'm growin' old an' foolish. I ain't got the confidence nur the narves I used to did. Reckon it's that pesky tumble over them rocks. I hain't bin plum right ever sence. Down thar, jest now, I felt like a chill struck me when I fust set eyes on them fires. 'Pears like somebody was a-walkin' over my grave. Mebbe it's a trap them imps is got over yender. They ketched me so easy oncet, mebbe they count on doin' of it over ag'in. Waal, they will ef they do. I'm goin' to smell out the hull e-tarnal business ef I die for 't!"

A presentiment of impending evil seemed resting upon the old man's spirits, and though he endeavored to "talk it off," communing in low, almost audible tones to himself, the gloomy sensation would not be shaken off. Proud of his own cool courage and steel-like nerves, Gospel George could not bear to even suspect himself of anything resembling fear, and thus he was led into acting with less than his usual circumspection.

Threading his way without noise or rustle, silent as a veritable phantom of the night, he stealthily approached the first signal fire. This had been kindled upon a broad, flat-topped rock, several yards in height, and though the flickering flames cast a wide circle of ruddy light around, the immediate base of the rock was shrouded in gloom, deep and wide enough to conceal a dozen ambushed foemen. Silently as the velvet-footed panther as it steals upon its unconscious victim, the old scout "snaked" his way through the tangled undergrowth and bowlders, his ears strained at every step, his eyes vainly seeking to penetrate the circle of obscurity, until he reached the upper hillside, without making any discovery.

Then he carefully laid aside his rifle, and placed his shoulder against a heavy bowlder. He paused to listen for a moment, but nothing suspicious met his ear. With one powerful heave, he overturned the bowlder and sent it crashing down directly toward the fire-topped rock. The course of the missile was true, and the collision awoke the dull echoes for rods around, but a sniff of utter disgust came from the eager scout that betrayed the full extent of his disappointment.

"A good hour fooled away on a empty trap! Old man, you're losin' of your seventeen senses! I'm gittin' downright ashamed of ye, fer a fact! S'pose Roxy Ann—an' that's jest what's the matter—I hain't bin fit fer crow-bait ever sence she was stole. Ef I don't git the old gal back ag'in 'fore long, I'll be foolisher 'n a purp that squats on his tail an' yelps at the moon ontel its hinder eend freezes fast to the airth. A glimp' o' her now 'd be better 'n a blue-mass pill afore breakfast. They is men, now, who'd snicker at a feller far takin' on so over a shemale critter, an' that one a mule, to boot; which proves the crap o' nat'ral-born fools ain't failed yit. Thar's more sound, hard sense wrapped up in that 'ar old gal's hide then would take to run this 'ere gelorious kentry from now tell never come back ag'in. I tell you, gentlemen, they ain't nothin' in this 'ere world that 'ar Roxy Ann cain't do, 'less it is playin' the fiddle clean through a tune. I'm free to own she's too lively fer that. I tried it oncet; an' she jest let out that lovely left duke o' her'n, an' ef thar wasn't chunks o' music scattered all over seventeen counties, then I wouldn't say so—but the fiddle wasn't much a'count, a'terwards. I tell you, gentlemen—"

With a half-abashed chuckle Gospel George cut his eloquence short, as the echoes of his own voice came back to him, recalling him to the duty he was neglecting. And fully satisfied now that there were no watchers concealed near this fire, at least, he started toward the second, still burning freely, nearly a mile distant, toward the north.

Despite the fact of his finding the first signal unwatched, Gospel George did not lessen his precautions in approaching the other beacon. He knew that fires could not be built without hands, and this one gave ample evidence of having been replenished since he left the golden valley.

As before, he found the beacon built upon a flat-topped rock, upon the very summit of the ridge, from whence its clear light could be seen by any observant eye for twenty miles around. And as before he could not distinguish any living object around or near the fire. But as he stealthily gained the summit, his roving eye caught the glimmer of a smaller fire, some rods down the opposite slope, through the leafy twigs of the surrounding shrubbery.

Satisfied that the object of his search awaited him there, the scout called his utmost skill into requisition, and inch by inch neared the concealed camp-fire. He could hear the sound of subdued voices, and an occasional laugh. More than once he was forced to lie close to the ground and strain every nerve to its utmost to crush down the mad impulse he felt to spring forward and claim his vengeance as he fancied he could distinguish the tones of Fiery Fred's voice. Never before had his iron will been so severely tested, and it was with a gasp of positive relief that he reached a spot from whence he could peer through the scanty foliage upon the party. But then his heart sunk until it was heavy as lead.

His glowing eyes quickly recognized Devils Dan, but the especial object of his hatred was not present. His long-nourished hopes had cheated his ears, and for a moment he felt heart-sick and despondent. But then, as a louder word than usual caught his attention, he knew that they were talking about the occupants of the valley, and in hopes of getting a clew to the plans of Fiery Fred, he ventured still nearer. Considering the nature of the ground to be traversed, the scout displayed almost marvelous skill, finally pausing beside a scrubby bush fairly within the circle of light, and not twenty feet from the nearest outlaw.

Scarcely had he settled down, when a low, peculiar whistle sounded from the hillside, almost directly behind him, and was promptly answered by Devil's Dan. Bold and resolute as he undeniably was, Gospel George felt a cold chill creep over him as he heard the sound of hasty footsteps approaching, for he knew that discovery was almost inevitable. Quickly drawing a revolver, with thumb upon the hammer, he awaited the result in breathless suspense. This was not of long duration. As he glanced over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of the new-comer, and sprung to his feet with a hoarse yell of vindictive exultation.

"At last—at last!" he yelled, and discharged two shots at the startled man, then dashed away, spurning the writhing figure beneath his feet, before one of the astounded outlaws could move a limb to interfere.

But only for a moment did this hesitation last. Then, with angry yells, the bandits started in hot pursuit of the fleeing avenger, their pistols speaking rapidly.

As yet untouched, Gospel George bounded on, his brain reeling and whirling like that of a drunken man. He knew that at last he had met his long-hunted foe, had stricken him down with righteous retribution. He had seen him fall, had seen the hot life-blood spout out, by the fire-gleams, had felt his quivering body beneath his feet, and the knowledge almost crazed him. Though he fled, it was merely by instinct. For the time he could only think of his stout blow for vengeance.

He seemed to avoid the thickets and bowlders

by instinct. He ran with footsteps that were sure and never slipping, gradually distancing his pursuers despite their most frantic efforts. Their pistol-shots were less frequent now, as only an occasional glimpse of the fugitive was had, but one of the missiles sped true enough to break the skin, and the acute smarting in a measure recalled the avenger to his senses.

He cast a rapid glance around him. As far as he could tell, the country around was unknown to him. At that instant he saw an opening that seemed to afford better footing, and hoping to entirely elude his pursuers by a sudden change of course, Gospel George turned aside and darted swiftly along the narrow passage between two high, almost perpendicular walls. A low laugh parted his lips, for he believed he recognized the spot, and felt that a short five minutes would see him in comparative safety.

But then—a sharp cry of horror broke from his lips, as he started back. Before him lay an abyss that the eye could not fathom without the broad light of day.

The walls upon either side were smooth and without any cover, and from the further end of the pocket came the wild, exultant yells of his relentless pursuers.

"Come on—come on, the hull kit!" grated the desperate scout, drawing his pistols. "Ef my time's come I won't go under alone!"

But the onset was not as speedy as he had expected. Confident of their victim, the outlaws did not care to run greater risk than was absolutely necessary, and it was several minutes before Gospel George caught sight of the foremost figure, gliding along the side wall.

With a quick, steady aim he fired. A wild shriek of agony told that the bullet had not been wasted.

Then the crowd rushed forward, yelling, cursing like demons—a dozen against one!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MAIDEN'S WARNING.

HARRY LANE uttered a little cry of dismay, and even the rest paused in their frantic scramble for gold, as Ned Allen spoke; the news concerned them one and all so nearly, that its utterance seemed to recall them to the stern realities of their precarious situation. A stout friend and ally murdered—their already frightfully reduced force still further lessened; even the little pile of golden nuggets lost its weird attraction for the moment as they realized what an enormous price its discovery had already cost them.

"There is no mistake—you are sure?" faltered Harry.

"We saw his body, nearly two miles from here. He could not have been killed when we heard those shots last night. Indeed, we found a trail and followed it a long ways before we came upon the body."

"An' right yere I want to say one thing," interposed Grumbling Dick, in an earnest tone. "Ef ever thar was a clean-hearted feller, white to the backbone, he was. The openist way was over here, whar he mought 'a' easy saved hisself; but 'stead o' that he runs off t'other way, gits into a trap an' goes under all in a heap!"

"Dick says true," said Allen, soberly. "As near as we can tell, this is what must have happened. There was a party of men ambushed near one of those signal-fires, and somehow Gospel George was discovered by them. We found blood, and where some one had fallen, so he must have made his mark on at least one enemy, since his trail was free from blood for a long distance from the ambush. As Dick says, the easiest trail would have been for him to return here, where he could count on aid, and I don't doubt he could have reached us, since he ran further than this before the end. I believe the poor fellow lost his life rather than draw us into another fight. They chased him into a trap out of which there could be no escape, and there murdered him."

"Thar was two karkidges besides his," broke in Dick. "An' I reckon from the 'pearance the old man left his mark on more'n one o' t'other. 'Twas like a hog-pen at killin'-time!"

There was but little more said upon the subject just then. Allen and Lane were too down-hearted, and the others, now that their wild eagerness had received a check, began to feel the effect of their great exertions, and to shiver in their dripping clothing. Even Dick Barnes did not grumble as it was proposed to cease their labors for the day. The gold was carefully collected and all returned to the wagons, where, in part compensation for his crippled state, Alfred Picard was allowed to take charge of the treasure until a better method of storing it away could be devised.

It was late in the afternoon before their hunger was appeased, and the gold-hunters then assembled to discuss their best mode of carrying on the campaign. Zabbie alone did not join in the consultation, but crouched beside the wagon, his eyes immovably fixed upon a little stick thrust into the sand, toward which the shadow cast by the forward wagon bow was slowly creeping; the signal which was to send him off upon the vendetta he had sworn against the Californian.

At length the moment drew near. He arose

and glided to his mother's side, who was watching over the scarcely-breathing form of her son, Malachi. She glanced up at the sound of his approach, a wistful look in her sunken eyes; but the boy's voice, though low, was still hard and cold.

"The time's come, mother. When you see me ag'in you may know that he's past tellin' all the hurt he's did us. Ef I don't come back—thar 'll be Jotham to look after you. Good-by!"

For a moment it seemed as though she was about to speak, but the icy look deepened, and with a low sigh she drew down his head and touched his brow with her cold lips. Without another word the young savage trailed his rifle and strode swiftly away toward the pass through which his enemy had vanished.

All this did not escape Allen's eye, and, though he knew that any interference upon his part could only result in evil, he resolved that the Californian should be warned that a relentless enemy was upon his trail. He saw that the hour was drawing near for his appointment with Inez de Mendoza, and cutting short the discussion, was soon after following upon the footsteps of Zabbie Grey.

His brain was in a confused whirl when he found himself at the rendezvous. The last few days had been so crowded with momentous events, with cares and trials, that he was well-nigh stupefied. What was to be the end of it all? As chief of the little band of gold-hunters, he felt himself in a measure responsible for all that befell them, and bitterly he cursed the day that led to the Indian's imparting his wonderful secret of gold. Only for that—

The sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs upon the rocky trail aroused him from his gloomy reverie, and glancing up, Ned Allen beheld a vision that caused his young blood to tingle in his veins, and his eyes to sparkle with unfeigned admiration.

Inez de Mendoza was before him, reining in her fiery little mustang until its heavy tail brushed the ground, its red nostrils dilated, its eyes flashing through the bushy forelock, its counter flecked with foam.

Upon her head the maiden wore a round, turban-like cap of dark velvet, a snowy plume brushing the heavy braids of hair that hung to the mustang's croupe. A jeweled clasp glittered above her forehead, while another sparkled at her throat, clasping a short, loose jacket, embroidered with gold thread and thickly studded with balls and tiny bells of the same metal. Beneath this was a cloud of lace and fine linen, enveloping a body that needed no artificial support to retain its perfect contour and symmetrical proportions. A China crapesash encircled her round, firm waist. A loose, flowing skirt, open in front from the waist down, fell over full Turkish trousers, gathered tight at the trim ankle with golden buckles. Boots of stamped leather fitted her tiny feet, and the blood which tinged the golden spurs at her heels bore evidence how hard she had ridden.

The vivid hues, glittering gold and jewels, reflecting the red rays of the declining sun, almost dazzled Ned Allen; but it was still harder to gaze upon the radiant face above unmoved. The lustrous eyes, so dark, so eloquent, the rich, ripe lips, the beautiful countenance, now so charmingly flushed—there was some excuse for the thrill that crept into the young miner's heart and crowded therefrom all those gloomy fears and self-accusations. Never before had he beheld one so radiantly beautiful, and little wonder he forgot to be shocked at her attitude—a *la Mejicana*.

That Inez perceived and was by no means offended by his unconcealed admiration was evident as her smile gladdened into a musical laugh, that aroused Allen as from an enchanted dream. Flushing hotly, he doffed his hat, and stepped forward, but in an instant the maiden was upon the ground, turning her mustang loose, to graze at will.

"A thousand pardons, senor," began Inez, in a soft voice, as she shyly accepted his proffered hand—"a thousand pardons if I have kept you waiting."

"I would willingly wait a year for the chance of seeing you," began Ned; but the maiden released her hand so quickly and stepped back with a sparkle in her large eyes that warned him he was too fast. "I did not mean to offend you," he added, more composedly. "Indeed I have not been waiting long, and you are but a few minutes late, by the sun."

"I would have been on time, only I was afraid some one was watching me. And yet," she added, slowly, her eyes seeking the ground, "perhaps it was as well that I had something else to think of. I am no coward, but it would have been hard, very hard for me to come here to meet you, a stranger—even at my own appointment. What must you have thought of me?"

"I don't think I dare tell you just yet," said Ned, with a little laugh, putting both hands behind him the better to resist the temptation to clasp the little paw that trembled at her side. "Sometime, when we are better acquainted, I may dare, if you promise not to start away like—"

"That time will never come. We would not have met again, only I did not wish you to think me ungrateful for your kindness to him—and me. Our paths in life divide from this point—and perhaps 'tis better thus," and Inez ended with a little sigh, so faint that Ned could scarcely believe he had heard it.

"I will not believe that!" he cried, impetuously, despite his effort to speak calmly. "There cannot be—unless you are—are married!"

"I am not married—but let that pass. What I have said is the truth, and words are idle. Nay, do not speak. There is no time to waste in argument. I came here to speak sober words of warning, not to listen to gallant speeches. It is painful enough for me to speak as I must of my father; let me get it over as quickly as possible. Listen, senor, and believe me I do not warn you without cause. You and your friends were never in greater danger than at this moment. Stay—I know that my father agreed to leave you unmolested, and he will keep that pledge sacred as far as himself and his servants are concerned. But there is another—you know him as Fiery Fred. He was at our house last night, and I heard him swear never to rest while one of your party drew breath. I tried to learn his plans, but failed. If I ever succeed, I will send you word by a trusty friend. Or better—you must leave this place. Do not delay an hour. Surely life is worth preserving—if not for yourself, then for some other—for your mother, if no one else."

"And you would have me go—slink away like a hound that has been thrashed?" muttered Ned.

"Yes," came the answer, but it was faint and hesitating.

"I thank you for warning me, lady, but that I will never do. I may be murdered as so many of my friends have, but it shall never be said that I was a coward. And more: unless you can sincerely say that you hate me, I will—I must see you again. Can you say that?"

"No—I do not hate—why should I?" faltered Inez; but the next instant, with a low cry, she sprung before Allen, almost enfolding him with her arms, as a man sprung out from behind a boulder, with leveled rifle.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GOSPEL TRUTH.

If ever man was fairly taken aback, Ned Allen was that being, for one brief instant. A pair of fair arms clinging closely around his neck, a plump cheek almost touching his lips, while he could feel the rapid fluttering of a heart against his breast, and all this coming so soon after the decided snubbing he had received, that it is little wonder he was utterly taken by surprise.

But the next moment he realized the truth—that Inez had interposed her body as a shield against a treacherous bullet—as he caught sight of the dark figure beside the boulder, whose rifle was still at a level.

Quick as thought Allen whirled the maiden around behind him, drawing a revolver with the same motion; but before he could bring the weapon to a level he saw his antagonist lower his rifle and heard the words:

"Waal—I ber-durned! ef it ain't the boss!"

The young miner started back in utter amazement, almost in terror, as though one from the dead had risen.

The voice was that of Gospel George—the man whom he had believed murdered, and over whose fate he had sorrowed deeply and sincerely. He rubbed his eyes like one just awaking from some wildly fantastic dream.

"I don't blame ye, boss, fer not bein' overly glad to see me, considerin'," added the phantom, slowly drawing nearer. "I'm so e-tarnally ashamed o' myself that I don't reckon I'll sleep a wink this blessed night—an' the same to you, ma'am. Ye see, this was the how: I was jest ridin' along over yender, when I see you two, an' thinks I—now thar's a angelliferous critter in diffikilty—ye see, boss, I kinder 'lowed you was one o' that pesky Fiery Fred's hounds, as had—Waal, I swan!"

Inez uttered a sharp whistle which brought the mustang quickly to her, and leaping into the saddle, uttered the single word—"Remember!"—then galloped rapidly away, never once looking back, despite the cry that Allen uttered.

"Thar's Roxy Ann over yender, ef you want to chase her," eagerly cried Gospel George. "Shell I fetch her—say?"

Perhaps no other words would have brought the young man so quickly to his senses, and as the daring rider disappeared behind the point of rocks, he turned to Gospel George with outstretched hands and eager voice.

"And is it you—really alive?"

"Don't that sorter feel like it?" grinned the scout, as his fingers closed like a vise upon the young man's hand. "Ain't thar livin' bone an' muskle an' sinner, eh? An' yit—mebbe I be dead. A feller's a blamed fool ef he thinks he's sartin o' anythin' in this 'ere world. I wouldn't swar you wasn't a woman, 'less I measured your tongue, fust. I've jest about made up my mind to leave the world an' climb a tree ontel things sorter settle down ag'in. I don't reckon you got any tobacker, hev ye?"

"But, man alive," sputtered Allen, "we saw your dead body—"

"That settles it! it's jest my luck!" and Gospel George scratched his head ruefully. "Then—who in thunder 'm I? A or'nary hoss-thief who's got so low down es to steal mules—fer thar's Roxy Ann, yender, an' I rid her here, didn't I? Ef I ain't me, I jest want to know who I be an' whar I come from, an' when you reckon I'll git thar, an' how I kin find out the hull dog-goned mystery anyhow—so thar!"

"Shake!" laughed Ned. "I'd swear to your identity in any court in the land, after that! But say—how was it?—what has happened?—from your appearance you've seen anything but a smooth time after you left us last night."

Truly, there was ample cause for Allen's curiosity, for a more woebegone-looking figure could scarcely be imagined than that presented by Gospel George. His garments were tattered and torn, stained with mud and patches of blood. A bloody bandage half enveloped his head, while his hair and beard looked as though he had indeed passed through a fiery ordeal, blackened and crisped.

"Ef I hain't see'd snakes, boss, I hope a grasshopper may kick my brains out! It's a long yarn—you hain't got nothin' to eat in your clothes, hev ye? I hain't ett nur drunk nothin' sence I left last night."

"No—but get your mule and we'll soon be at camp. You can tell us all, then, and only make one story of it."

Gospel George was soon astride of his beloved Roxy Ann, and the trio took up the trail to the golden valley.

"But what you mean 'bout findin' my karkidge?" he asked, after a moment's silence; whereupon Ned told him all that had occurred since he left the camp. Of his following the trail and finding the bodies down the ravine, frightfully mutilated by the fall, but one of which he had firmly believed was none other than the missing scout.

"Gi' me your paw, boss!" cried Gospel George, with emotion. "I see the hull thing, now! Thar was a feller 'mong them bloodhounds so e-tarnally like me that I hollered out every time I hit him, an' when we tumbled over thar, an' I knowed one o' us two was killed, dog my sister's cats ef I could tell which one it was! An' ever sence, I've bin dodgin' my own shadder, skeered all to thunder 'cause I couldn't recomember what dirty tricks I'd bin doin' when I was him. I tell you, boss, ef things keep goin' on like they hev bin, I'm gwine right back to my old woman. She never gives me time to fergit myself."

But little more was said until after the camp beside the lake was reached. As might naturally have been expected, the appearance of Gospel George created a sensation, and numerous were the exclamations and questions which greeted him when the miners were once fairly convinced that he was indeed in the flesh. Only one held aloof; and that one was Grumbling Dick. That he, in whose mouth praise of any living being was rare as grapes on a pumpkin-vine, should thus be betrayed into eulogizing the bravery, rare good-humor and sound sense of one who ought to be dead, but was not, he considered almost a personal insult, and in grumbling disgust he drew aside from the eager scene.

Gospel George received the ovation with unwonted taciturnity, nor would he answer a question until he had fully satisfied his thirst and hunger. After this he borrowed a loaded pipe and stretched himself out upon a blanket with a satisfied grunt. But he was not permitted to enjoy his smoke in silence. The curiosity of the miners would be satisfied.

"You're wuss then a pack o' old wimmen!" he exclaimed, pettishly. "Jest hold your hush, an' I'll tell ye the hull pesky scrape; but ef any one o' ye puts in with your whys an' whiches an' wharfor's, I'll jest shet clam an' let ye guess the rest—so thar!"

"You couldn't no more stop his mouth when he once fairly gits started, than a cat kin play the fiddle," snorted Grumbling Dick, in utter disgust.

"'Nother cabbage-head buisted!" chuckled Gospel George. "Good Lawd! old man, didn't the boss tell me all how you went on 'cause I was gone up—how you was a-mournin' an' a-weepin' an' a-borryin' of han'kerchers from the hull crowd to sop up the salt-water so they wouldn't be a flood—"

"An' did he tell you I'd lick you like thunder jest as soon as you git over bein' a cripple?" roared the angry miner. "Ef he didn't, then he's as big a fool as you be—an' bigger or lyin'er they don't make 'em."

There was a general laugh as Grumbling Dick strode away still faster, as though afraid to trust himself within hearing.

"You know what I went fer," at length began Gospel George; "an' I found it out, too—I did so! Fust thing I knowed I run chuck-up into the wust kind o' hornets' nest—I reckon they was mebbe two hundred on 'em, all full-grown, with stingers on each eend. They was talkin' 'bout you fellers, an' cussin' of you awful—so bad, gentlemen, that I couldn't stan' it; so out I steps an' spits on my han's an' sais, in jest so

many words, as how they was a pack o' most e-tarnal, ow-dacious liars. Them's jest eggsactly what I said, gentlemen. An' then I opened up on 'em. I made sure o' one feller the fust—an' that was the bull-toad in the puddle—old Sorrel-top hisself."

"You are sure you killed him?" exclaimed Ned Allen.

"I putt two bullets in him; I didn't hev time to stop an' feel his pulse," returned the scout, with a short laugh. "But ef he ever troubles you ag'in, you kin call me a liar! Waal, I downed him, an' then I waded in, big! It was long odds, gentleman, but I was mad. I keeled over so many that the rest begun to git skeered an' looked round fer a hole to crawl into, so, es I wanted to make a clean job of it, I jest turned an' run away, lettin' on like I was bad skeered. In course the pesky fools follered me, an' so I led 'em on, right chuck into a mighty purty trap. But, somehow, it wouldn't work right. The blamed cowards was skeered to tumble over as I wanted 'em to, so what was I to do? Why, gentlemen, I jest jumped over to show 'em how easy it was! I reckon they was more goats in the flock than sheep, fer nary other one would foller my lead! I yelled to 'em to come on, but they wouldn't come wuth a cent! They jest turned tail an' run away, devil take the hindmost!"

"I couldn't foller 'em, 'cause I hed to go too fur round. That tuck me ontel plum day, when I found myself not fur from whar the gang holes themselves. That made me think of my Roxy Ann, yender—ain't she a beauty? So I looks around an' purty soon smells out the place whar they keep thar stock—a mighty cute kiver, too, an' thar she was! She knowed me in a minnit, gentlemen, an' up she runs an' tried to putt her arms aroun' my neck—figgeratively speakin', of course, ye know. But the pore creature was so excited she didn't know which eend was the right one, an' 'most kicked my head off—she did so! But I knowed it was a mistake, an' so jumped on an' told her to git! An' mebbe she didn't! Jest look at my ha'r, gentlemen! She up an' got so fast the friction o' the air jest nat'ally sot me afire! 'Twas the orfullest—"

Ned Allen uttered a sharp cry as a pebble struck him upon the head, then bounded near the fire. And upon that pebble, secured with a bit of cord, was a scrap of paper!

The men interchanged glances of wonder, almost of awe.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DIABOLISM.

For an instant the men stared at each other in mute amazement, but then Gospel George sprung to his feet and snatched up the mysteriously delivered parcel, scattering the firebrands and extinguishing the flames with one vigorous kick, exclaiming as he did so:

"Scatter, boys, an' look out fer snakes!"

This prompt action broke the spell, and weapons in hand, the gold-hunters divided and began quartering the ground in search of the being who had cast the paper-enveloped stone, guiding each other's progress by their low signals; but their search was in vain, and after hunting for nearly an hour, the most resolved were forced to admit themselves baffled.

"I cain't see into it," muttered Gospel George, as he returned to the spot where the dextrously-scattered firebrands still smoldered; "unless—we was all here, together, 'cept one—"

"You take me fer a durn fool?" angrily interrupted Grumbling Dick. "You want to go easy ef you don't want a mountain a-climbin' up your back—"

"Stop your sparring, both of you," cried Allen, sharply. "There is more in this than an idle trick. You have the paper, old man. I would almost swear that I saw writing upon it as it lay by the fire. Hurry—help start a light—it may be an important message—"

"An' mebbe a love-letter," grinned Gospel George.

Ned Allen said no more, though had there been light enough it would have been seen that his cheek was flushing hotly, for much the same idea had occurred to him—not, indeed, that it was a love-letter—but might it not be a message from Inez de Mendoza? He fancied that she was on the point of telling him more when their interview was interrupted by the appearance of Gospel George—might she not have taken this method, making use of the trusty hand of which she had spoken, in preference to running the risk of another meeting?

All these reflections flashed through his mind while endeavoring to rekindle the fire, and when the tiny flame gained strength, the hand that he extended toward Gospel George for the pebble, trembled perceptibly. Though the old man grinned knowingly, he said nothing as he handed Allen the little packet.

The young man smoothed out the crumpled paper, and stooping low, read aloud the address—his own name.

The others crowded around in breathless in-

terest, as his eyes glanced hurriedly over the few lines of bold, decided writing.

"Listen," he said, then reading aloud:

"CAPTAIN EDWARD ALLEN:

"Allow me to observe that you and your comrades are running a very foolish risk in remaining here after being repeatedly warned to leave. You will never be suffered to carry one ounce of gold away from the valley, and may congratulate your lucky stars that you can escape with life. Only that you are accompanied by ladies, my only message would be delivered through my revolver. For their sake you are granted two days from this evening—August 12th—in which to make your retreat. If not gone before that hour, you will receive a cordial visit from

FIERY FRED."

"An' that long-legged ragamuffin swore 'at he rubbed Fiery Fred out!" exclaimed Dick Barnes. "Lord! how I do hate a liar!"

As for Gospel George, he seemed fairly thunderstruck.

"They must be some mistake—you couldn't 'a' read it right!" he muttered, snatching the document from Ned Allen's hand, and with fingers that trembled like one afflicted with the ague, strove to find the date. "Ef I could only read! You wouldn't cheat an old man like me, gentlemen? But, don't I know? didn't I see him fall—didn't I see him dead? It's a low-down, dirty trick to fool me! But, look out! whoever did it won't hev time to say his pra'r's when I lay hands onto him!"

"Don't be foolish, old man," said Allen; "if you have failed once, there may be another chance. You need not look at Dick. I am ready to swear that he cannot write more than his own name, and as for the rest of us, you know that we did not throw the stone."

But Gospel George refused to be consoled, and shaking off the friendly hand, he picked up his blanket and withdrew to one side, lying down and wrapping himself up like a mummy. It was late before his example was followed. The mysteriously-delivered note furnished ample food for conversation. Yet the affair had been so dextrously managed that only one fact could be satisfactorily determined. The pebble could not have been cast far, else its contact with Ned Allen's head would have been more severely felt.

The messenger, then, must have crept up to within at least twenty yards of the camp-fire. The reflection was not an agreeable one, to say the least. Which of them could feel safe with so skillful an enemy upon his trail?

That night was a wakeful one for the most of the party, even when not on guard duty, but day dawned without any further alarm. After a hearty breakfast, Ned Allen called a council, and earnestly requested each member to give his sincere opinion. As for himself he declared his intention to remain at the valley, not only because an ample fortune only awaited the gathering, but because the wounded men, though progressing as favorably as could be expected, were still unable to bear removal, especially Malachi Grey.

To think of retreat now would simply mean to desert the wounded and the women. The determination of the others was tersely embodied in Grumbling Dick's threat to "crawl all over the feller as fust said crawfish!"

Warned by the experience of the past day, Allen assigned particular duties to each man—save Gospel George, who had stipulated for a roving commission on joining them—and won a promise from all that these duties should be strictly complied with. Indeed, after the warning they had received, all knew that there must be perfect discipline if they would avoid worse.

Gospel George left them directly after breakfast, nor was he seen again until after dark. The remainder worked hard and steadily, with far more method than before. There was much to be done before they could hope to reap their richest reward. The bed of the stream between the fall and the lake promised them the most gold, if properly managed, and to this end they set to work with a will, one other, besides Picard, keeping guard by turns. Favored by the lay of the ground as they were, it would not be difficult for them to turn the course of the stream so as to leave its present bed bare. This, with the addition of a dam across the neck of the lake, it was believed, would effect their purpose. And, if not otherwise troubled, they might hope to begin reaping the reward of their toil by one week at the outside.

Through all that day not a living being was seen besides their own company, and, with each a secret hope that they had effectually "bluffed" the outlaw chief, they lay down to sleep, wearied with their hard labor. As before, two men were kept on guard at a time; there was no alarm, each relief being assured by his predecessor that nothing was stirring, and yet, just after arising, Jotham Grey, with a sharp cry, pointed to the side of the wagon, where, swaying in the slight breeze, fluttered a scrap of paper, covered with writing. As before, this message was addressed to Captain Edward Allen, and as before, the signature was that of Fiery Fred. In silence the party listened to Allen read the note, which recapitulated their doings through the day, ending by repeating the warning of the preceding night. In silence they interchanged glances, dark and gloomy, tinged

with suspicion. Who could be the mysterious messenger—who but one of themselves! Though not uttered in words, this was what those covert glances declared.

Already the poison was working slowly but surely.

Doggedly the day's work was pursued; but the laughter, the jesting retorts, the eager speculations over the amount of gold which was to finally reward them—none of this passed between them. Even Allen was subdued and gloomy. Though he could not explain the mystery, he felt almost sure that he could answer for each of his comrades as for himself. He had known them all for years, all, that is, except Dick Barnes and Gospel George.

Dick, he would almost take an oath was true, and—supposing him the one—what object would the old scout have in playing such a part? He had fought in their cause against the outlaw, and making his blows count, too; and equally clear was his hatred for Fiery Fred. It was a muddle, clear through, as he was forced to admit, and tried to dismiss the unwelcome thoughts by resolving to secretly keep a close watch upon both Dick and Gospel George.

That night, though the fires were permitted to go down, not one of the party thought of sleep, but occupied the rifle-trench, weapons in hand. During his day's scout, Gospel George had seen an unusual stir around the mountain den of the outlaws, and expressed his belief that the signal-fires had performed their work in calling in the whole of Fiery Fred's band.

The hour of midnight passed without alarm, and the miners began to congratulate themselves, when what looked like a meteor arose from the hill beyond the river, and fell within a few yards of their position. By the tiny, flickering light they could see an arrow quivering in the ground. Gospel George crept out and secured it. Around the shaft was wrapped a third message, simply stating that not one of the party should live to see another night.

Lest this might be only a ruse to throw them off their guard, the entire party kept on the alert until broad day. Breakfast was eaten in silence; then Allen advised his comrades to sleep instead of work, since he believed that the object of these repeated alarms was to wear them out through loss of sleep, when they might be easily surprised and overpowered. His advice was silently complied with, but Ned, himself, wearied though he was, could not sleep. The haunting suspicions were still present, despite the last night's evidence.

Gospel George remained in camp that day, and upon him and Allen devolved the keeping guard. It was dreary work, and when night came again, even Allen doubted whether he could endure another such. Better the final struggle at once than this horrible suspense.

Refreshed by their day's repose, the four miners and the wounded Picard declared their readiness to stand guard, but it was thought better to divide the watch into two parts. Allen, completely worn out, lay down early and soon fell asleep; nor did he awake until the gray light was growing in the east. Then, as his eyes opened, a sharp cry broke from his lips. A lock of his long hair was knotted around the handle of a dagger, the blade of which was driven deep into the earth!

CHAPTER XXV.

A PRIVATE ADVENTURE.

FOR a moment after uttering his cry of surprise—almost terror—Ned Allen was overcome by a dizzy, sickening sensation hard to describe. The knowledge that their utmost vigilance could not guard against these repeated warnings—that there was one hovering near them, day and night, who appeared able to enter their camp at will, to post his message beneath the very eyes of men whose utmost energies were bent on solving the mystery—that he had lain wholly at the mercy of this dark unknown, whose hand could have driven the keen blade into his heart just as easily as into the earth; these thoughts caused his brain to whirl until a bloody mist seemed spread before his eyes.

The cry attracted general attention, and great was the consternation when the miners beheld their young leader lying pale and motionless upon his blanket, his long hair half-concealing the jeweled haft, the blade of which seemed buried in his throat. The excitement acted as a restorative, and Allen arose, with a sickly smile, leaving the dagger in its earthen sheath.

Before answering any of the flood of questions that were poured upon him, Allen quickly but keenly scrutinized each countenance before him, but if he hoped to gain any clew from this, he was doomed to disappointment. Even the most suspicious could have detected nothing save genuine astonishment, in more than one case deeply tinged with superstition; though only Grumbling Dick spoke out his thoughts.

"Ef it wasn't fer them wimmen! A feller's a darn fool to buck ag'inst the devil and all his imps—an' that's jest what we're doin'! They ain't no livin' man as kin sneak aroun' an' cut up sech doin's, never leavin' no sign behind n'r nothin'—you ain't tell me!"

"That's a—your eye, Dick," sharply interposed Harry. "That some one is playing

it down mighty fine on us, I won't deny, but as to its being anything more than an unusually sly, sneaking dog—I'd give a year of my life just to have one squint at him over a pistol barrel. Now, look here. There are two ways to look at this matter. Somebody has played these tricks, thinking, no doubt, to drive us away from our find. That person is either an open enemy, or a pretended friend—one of Fiery Fred's men, or else one of us seven men! Hold hard—there is no use in talking. Whoever would play these tricks would deny it, of course. There is only one way to get to the bottom; and that is for each and every one of us to suspect every other person—to watch his every action, night and day; then, at a certain hour—for instance, directly after supper—we will meet in council, each man will deliver his report in turn; and, also, each and all of us must stand ready to answer every charge, clearly and without reserve. You may say that such a course will create hard feelings; but I don't believe it. If we all publicly swear to perform our duty, honestly and without prejudice, there can be only injury to one person—and that person is just the one we want to find! There, gentlemen," concluded Lane, "you have my ideas, and if this plan is conscientiously carried out, one of three things will be the result. It will be found that one of us, now present, is guilty; or if not that, that these tricks will have to be abandoned; or, that the guilty person is an outsider, which will at least restore perfect confidence between ourselves."

Allen grasped Harry's hand, and pressed it warmly.

"Old fellow, your head is the best among us! and I, for one, bind myself to follow your advice from beginning to end. If anything can solve this mystery, your plan will."

The rest followed in Allen's wake, there not being one dissenting voice; and then, in words prepared by Harry Lane, a solemn oath was taken to show no prejudice or favor in their reports, and heartily agreeing not to take offense where all were to be treated alike. Then, by common consent, the matter was dropped.

It was agreed that, though one man was to stand guard, the work of laying bare the river-bed should be prosecuted regardless of the threats made by Fiery Fred or his representative. Since Alfred Picard, though steadily improving, was still unable to handle pick-axe or spade, he was selected as the sentinel, and posted upon a little rise in the ground, not far distant from the scene of labor. Beside him lay all the weapons of the miners, save one revolver each, which was worn constantly. Thus, in case of emergency, the entire party could be armed and ready for hot work inside of ten seconds from the alarm.

The work progressed steadily, without interruption, until noon. It was during the hour after dinner, which was habitually one of rest, that Harry Lane drew Allen aside, and when safe beyond earshot of the others, said:

"Let me look at that curious present of yours, Ned; I have a reason for it," he added, as Allen produced the dagger. "I knew it! I can tell you where that plaything came from—or, at least, where it was less than one week ago. You remember my hobby—a love for rich or curious specimens of armory."

"Yes—but what—speak out, man!"

"You remember that girl—the daughter of old Mendoza, I believe? Well, she wore that identical dagger in her sash, on the day we tried her father. I would willingly take my oath on it."

A new light seemed to burst upon the young miner's mind, and he never knew what answer he made to his friend as they slowly paced back to camp. He firmly believed that this was the message promised him by Inez, though it would have pushed him hard to have explained the reasons for his belief. One whose mind was less disturbed, would have seen the utter folly of such an idea. No such risk would have been incurred in order to deliver an article against the recognition of which the chances were thousands to one. But Ned was not reasoning; he was acting purely on impulse, and when his comrades arose to resume their labor, he briefly explained that he believed he had found a clew to much that had puzzled them so utterly, and asked a full consent to his devoting the remainder of the day to investigating the matter. Only Lane objected; he believed that Allen would incur too great a risk in venturing beyond the valley, alone.

"At least, let me go with you," he urged.

"No; you are needed here. I pledge my honor, though, not to run any unnecessary risk. I will be back by sunset, at the outside."

"Ef you chaine to see anybody we ever see afore, jest give 'em our re-gards!" Gospel George called after him; but if Ned heard, he made no reply.

The young miner pressed eagerly forward, though still keeping a keen look-out, until he reached the spot where he last parted with Inez de Mendoza. There he paused, glancing eagerly around; but his face clouded as no living being met his eye. What he expected, probably would have puzzled himself to state, even if his wishes were more clear.

He paused beside the boulder for several minutes, buried in thought; then, with a sudden air of resolution, he started forward, heading for the point of rocks around which the fair rider had vanished.

"I will see her!" he muttered aloud. "There may be risk, but I can't go on like we have these few days back—it is enough to drive a dead man crazy! I'll see her, even if I have to ask for admission to the house."

Though by no means an experienced scout, Ned's eyes were keen enough to pick up the trail after passing the rock-point, and following it for nearly a mile, he came out upon a low ridge, from which he could look down upon the square stone building which he knew must be where Mendoza dwelt.

The building appeared utterly deserted; not even an animal was to be seen. For some minutes he watched, doubting what course to pursue; but this was decided for him in the next instant. Slowly passing down the little valley, evidently choosing a course that would yield shelter from the house, he spied a rider—and even at that distance he recognized Inez. His first impulse was to meet her as speedily as possible, but a second thought convinced him that she was not using such precautions without good reasons, so, marking her probable course, Allen drew back and hastened along in hopes of intercepting her.

He had calculated closely. When once beyond possible discovery from the building, he crossed the ridge and found the rider just below him. Inez wrenched her mustang around at his sudden appearance, but at the sound of his voice she paused, an eager light in her fine eyes as the young miner hastened down the slope.

"I was riding in hopes of meeting you," she said, hastily, not heeding his rather impulsive greeting. "But not here—I fear I am watched—back over the ridge—*anda—anda!*"

Not less agitated than herself, Ned obeyed, finally pausing close beside a huge boulder.

"You were coming to our house, señor," she said, in an eager, trembling voice. "That you must never do! your life would be in great danger—they would kill you!"

"And who are *they*?" laughed Ned. "Is there not a truce between us and your people?"

"It has been broken—one of your men shot my father—and some one told him of our meeting—*ay de mi!* what have I not endured!"

An angry exclamation broke from Allen's lips, but before he could speak, Inez hastily uttered:

"Never mind that—listen! You are betrayed—the victim of a dastardly treachery! There is a traitor in your midst—no, I do not know his name; I could not learn that, but he is in league with the villain you know as Fiery Fred. I have tried to warn you before this, but since that evening I have been kept a close prisoner, and I had no one whom I could trust to send you the message I promised—"

"Then you did not send me this?" exclaimed Allen, extending the jeweled dagger.

"No—though it was mine—but he took it from me—I tried to kill him—"

At that moment, without shout or warning, half a dozen rough, fierce-looking men darted around the boulder, from both sides, and precipitated themselves upon the young miner. Though taken so completely by surprise, and not given time to draw a weapon, Allen struggled so desperately that he fairly shook off his assailants; but before he could do more, a pistol was discharged, almost against his head, and he fell back without a sigh or groan.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FIERY FRED NAMES THE DAY.

WHEN Inez de Mendoza told Edward Allen that she had suffered much, of late, she spoke nothing more than the literal truth. She had endured both bodily and mental pain since that interrupted interview. The fear which she expressed then that her steps were being dogged, had only too sure a foundation, and the report of the stolen meeting reached home before she did. She found her father, cold and stern, awaiting her at the great gate, and one glance told her that he knew all. Without a word he motioned her to her room, following close upon her steps. But if his cold deliberation told her how deeply offended he was, it also gave her time to decide upon the course she must follow; and thus, when the long pent-up storm of rage, anger, almost curses came, she, drawn proudly erect, met it with an unflinching front. Not a word did she attempt to utter until her father, out of breath and exhausted by the fury of his own passions, sunk into a chair, muttering hoarsely:

"Have you not one word to say—no defense to make? Mother of Jesus! it cannot have gone so far as that—"

"Stop!" almost imperiously interrupted Inez. "You have said enough, and more than enough. Had your spy been as keen of ear as he was sharp-sighted, you might have spared us both this painful scene. Know, then, that I had two motives in meeting this gentleman. One was to thank him for saving *your* life; the other to warn him against an unscrupulous enemy, who had sworn his destruction. You know whom I

allude to—Senor Gonzalo—or Fiery Fred, the outlawed murderer, robber, and scoundrel in general."

"You are mad, girl!" cried the Californian, his face ashen gray, casting a nervous glance over his shoulder.

Inez laughed hardly, almost contemptuously. "I see you are expecting him. Very well; so long as you do not expect me to meet him again. That I will never do. I never liked him, even while he was at his best, but now that I know him in his true colors, I would sooner herd with lepers than be for one moment in his company!"

"This is a sudden change, Inez," said Mendoza, forcing himself to speak calmly. "It is not so long since that you promised to become his wife."

"Ay—because you declared that upon my consent depended your honor, if not life. But now—not even that consideration can influence me."

"Now—does that mean, since you have met this ragged Yankee? this robber of other men's gold—no doubt some despicable, low-bred cur, who was forced to leave his country for his country's good—"

"Father, why did we leave our own dear house so suddenly—nay," cried Inez, startled at the effect of her words. "Pardon—I did not mean that!"

"Mean *what*?" asked Don Estevan, though with an evident effort. "I do not understand you. But let that pass. You must never see this heretic again—you must never even think of him. Swear this, upon your Master's cross—"

"I cannot—I will not! You ask too much, father. I have always obeyed you, but in this I cannot. You ask me to take an oath that I would break every day—ay! every hour!"

"Are you mad, girl? or am I dreaming?"

"No; it is I who have been dreaming, all my life—but now I am awake. Father, what mother felt for you, I feel for this stranger! I see him before me every time I close my eyes—I can hear his voice still ringing in my ears. I know that I love him—that I shall love him until I die! And this is the reason I will not take the oath you wish—why I swear that I will never receive your friend as you and he wish."

"And now listen to me!" cried the Californian, hoarsely, his face convulsed with fury. "I swear that you *shall* receive him—that you shall keep your pledge to become his wife. And more—I swear to you that if you are obstinate, that I, with my own hands, will kill this accursed heretic, and bring you his bloody head for a bridal present!"

"You will make me a murderess as well, then," slowly uttered Inez, as though the words issued with difficulty. "If a single hair of his head is harmed, I swear never to know rest until I have had revenge, deep and bitter—ay! even against *you*, my father!"

"Very prettily spoken! If all other arts fail you, fair lady, you can make your fortune upon the stage."

Father and daughter started at the sound of that soft, musical voice. Fiery Fred was leaning carelessly against the door-post, half laughing, half sneering at the tableau he had interrupted. Inez was the first to recover, and in a clear, ringing tone she spoke:

"You are intruding, sir; begone, or I will summon the servants to teach you common politeness!"

"That would be taking a great deal of useless trouble, my love; and I fear the poor fellows would find me rather an untractable pupil," sneered the outlaw.

"Father, order him to leave the house!" impetuously cried Inez, turning pale with anger.

"If father is wise, he will do no such thing," and as he spoke, the former languid insolence changed to an air of stern authority, as he closed the door behind him and turned the massive key, ending by slipping it into his pocket.

"There—there!" he added, impatiently, as the Californian made a step toward him. "For once in our lives let us be honest together, and play our cards faced. There has been too much time wasted, too much talking and not near enough action. I am tired of this child's play—and *you*, my lady—you are really in need of a touch of the curb—"

"Senor Don Gonzalo—in my own house—!"

"In *your* house? shall I call the servants and ask them *who* is their master, you or I?" sneered the ruffian. "Peace! you have tried your way, and failed, most miserably; it is my turn, now. I am going to play the limits, this time—break or make. To satisfy you that I know my game, listen:

"You, Don Estevan, are a forger, a defaulter, a price set upon your head. You, my dear, to insure my silence, have pledged yourself to become my wife. I know that you do not love me quite to distraction—I heard enough to determine all doubts, before coming in, just now. Well, to tell the simple truth, I am rather glad of that; there is so much more pleasure in store for me—in other words, it will be amusing sport, the breaking you in. You see I am perfectly frank with you. I don't love you—I never did, probably never will; and had you

taken less pains to show your dislike, I dare say I should never have dreamed of wooing you for a wife."

"You are insulting, sir!" gasped the Californian, one hand seeking his bosom.

"And if I am, who are *you* to complain? Beware! I am not in the humor for nonsense. Let your weapon rest, my friend, unless you wish to die unshriven. Take your seat in yonder chair; I mean it—there is no use for you to struggle. Remember that I, too, carry a weapon in my breast—ay! and one that I know right well how to use!"

With a groan of impotent anger, the old man literally obeyed, sinking into the designated chair and covering his face with his trembling hands.

"And now, my lady," said Fiery Fred, turning once more toward Inez. "I have a few words more to speak to you, and then I leave you to your sweet dreams—of this gallant Edward Allen. Ha! *that* touches you? The noble captain of ragamuffins has made a conquest, I see. Well, do not think that I shall be a jealous husband—"

"You will never have the chance," interrupted Inez, forcing herself to speak with that calmness which means so much. "I will kill you with my own hand, first!"

"I have heard a score stout men threaten as much," laughed the outlaw; "but I am living, still, and my death will be a more glorious one than by a soft woman's hand. So much for your threats. Now lend me your ears for a moment, while I prove what a generous husband I shall be."

"Your father threatened to bring you this fellow's head for a bridal present. I pledge you my word to do even more than that, for I will convey him here, alive and unharmed. He shall be one of the witnesses to our happy espousal—he shall wish us joy, and, if you are on extra good behavior, he may even be permitted to salute the bride—after the happy bridegroom, of course. Now—am I not magnanimous?" and his low, taunting laugh rung out insolently.

Inez made no reply. It seemed as though she must suffocate. Her brain reeled and she would have fallen but for the support afforded by the high-backed chair beside her. Don Estevan started as though to assist her, but at a sharp order from the ruffian he sunk back, with a groan of bitterness. It seemed as though the sound of that hated voice acted as a stimulant to the almost fainting maiden. She drew her proud form erect and met his sneering glance with one of open defiance.

"Now I will proceed," coolly resumed Fiery Fred, resolved on enjoying to the full his revenge for all former coldness and slights. "In just one week from this I shall have everything in readiness for our wedding. There will be a priest, holy enough to satisfy your every scruple. The one particular witness will also be here. In the meantime, I don't think it would be good for your health to take too much exercise, and I shall leave orders to that effect. You will save yourself considerable annoyance if you bear this fact in mind."

He paused, but Inez made no reply. With a little laugh, Fiery Fred stepped toward her. Contrary to his evident expectation, the maiden made no attempt to avoid his approach; instead she pushed aside the heavy chair, a cold smile upon her face. Then, quick as thought, she sprang forward and struck heavily at his throat, a glittering dagger in her hand.

But something in her eyes had warned the ruffian of peril, and he dextrously caught her descending hand, wrenching it so that the weapon dropped to the floor, and she turned sick and dizzy. Then his arms were closed around her; his burning lips were pressed upon hers for one instant.

"A kiss for a blow," he laughed, stooping and securing the jeweled dagger. "And now, my darling, good-night. As for you, Don Estevan, I must trouble you to bear me company. I have a few words for your private ear."

Like one in a dream, the Californian followed him from the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DISAGREEABLE SITUATION.

INEZ uttered a scream of alarm as the gang of ruffians burst upon them so suddenly, and sprang toward her snorting mustang, flight being her first impulse. But this was only momentary. Naturally courageous and high-spirited, her training since early childhood had been such as had rendered her wonderfully self-reliant and devoid of fear. She turned to see the young miner hampered by a dozen arms, only to free himself by a tremendous effort—to hurl aside his assailants as though they were mere children—to follow up his momentary advantage, striking down two burly ruffians with blows of his clenched fists, that sounded like the dull *thud-thud* of a horse's hoofs upon the springy turf. But then, as though fearful of losing him after all, one of the cursing desperadoes thrust his pistol almost against the miner's head—she heard the report—she saw Allen fling up his arms and fall backward like a dead man. For one instant she stood as though petrified; then, with an inarticulate scream she sprang to

the assassin's side, the dagger so recently returned to her by Allen flashing in the air. Swift as the lightning's shaft the weapon descended, before the assassin could realize his peril. Her eye was true, her arm strong enough to drive the good weapon home. Just above the collar-bone it struck, ranging down and tapping his foul heart's blood.

But the frenzied woman never paused to note the effect of her mad stroke for vengeance. She saw the man she had learned to love—suddenly, but with all the fervor of her hot, tropical blood—lying motionless, bleeding, dead, as she believed, at her feet, and sinking down beside his body she raised his head to her breast, pressing her lips upon his, calling him by name, to return to life, to her, lavishing upon his insensible ears the fondest epithets mortal lips could frame into speech—unheeding the fierce curses of the enraged bandits as they gathered around their dying comrade, unhearing their brutal threats and imprecations.

Fortunately for her, aid was close at hand. Don Estevan rode hastily up, and leaping to the ground he thrust the scowling villains aside and touched his daughter upon the shoulder.

"Come with me, girl," he said, sternly, as she raised her eyes at the touch. "You have wrought enough mischief for once. Come, I say! unless you would have me use force."

"They have murdered him—see!" she muttered, piteously.

"Better for him—for us all, perhaps—if they had! Look! he is opening his eyes! fool! would you have him learn your mad folly?" grated the Californian, lifting Inez to her feet by main force.

Don Estevan had spoken the truth. Though through no mercy of the dead ruffian, the leaden missile had merely grazed his skull, tearing through the scalp and momentarily stunning him, but not seriously injuring him. Now he opened his eyes and faintly raised his head with a wondering air.

"Beware!" cried Don Estevan, authoritatively; "remember your master's orders—on your life do not injure him! Bind him securely and bring him to the house—blindfolded, mind. You have already exceeded your orders."

"And if he did, the poor devil has paid for it with his life—thanks to that wilcat of yours," insolently growled one of the men.

The Californian made no reply to this rude speech, but placed Inez upon her mustang, springing into his own saddle, and galloped away, holding firmly to her bridle-rein.

Reaching the stone building he dismounted, and half-carried, half-led his daughter into the house, placing her upon the bed in her own room and summoning the housekeeper to attend to her. Inez lay still in what seemed a sort of stupor, and, really anxious for her welfare, Don Estevan did not leave her side until he heard the approach of the party guarding Ned Allen. Meeting them at the entrance, he signed them to lead the prisoner into a room upon the left.

"Put him in that chair; unbind his eyes. Now you can go; but keep close to the house," he added, as his orders were promptly obeyed, save that one man—a short, villainous-looking fellow—instead of following the others in their exit, coolly dropped into an easy-chair beside the table. "You heard what I said?" demanded the Californian, his face flushing, hotly.

"I don't reckon I'm quite deaf, boss," grinned the fellow, pouring out a glass full of liquor. "I hear you, but I hear a louder voice fust. I take my orders from *your* s'perior, I do—an' he said, 'Weasel,' said he, 'don't you let the old man speak one single word to that feller as you don't hear an' see.' An' them's the orders I'm goin' to kerry out, too. So go on with your rat-killin'—an' I'll boss the job."

For a moment it seemed as though the Californian would spring upon the insolent boor, but Ned heard a sharp click, and glancing in that direction he saw that Weasel was covering Don Estevan with a cocked revolver.

"You can't come no gum-game on thic chicken, boss," he chuckled. "Orders is orders—an' I've got mine."

Evidently afraid to trust himself to reply, the Californian turned abruptly toward Allen, thenceforward acting as though the outlaw had no existence.

"When last we parted, senor, I did not expect to meet you again, so soon."

"And now that we *have* met, perhaps you will be so kind as to explain why I am here, a bound prisoner—why I was ambushed like a dog—after your swearing upon the cross of your faith to keep the peace?" demanded Ned, only the remembrance that Inez' father stood before him restraining the bitter taunts that rose to his lips.

"Look!" cried Don Estevan, brushing the hair from his temples and touching a livid welt upon his brow. "You speak of truce—this was made by a bullet, no longer than yesterday, and one of *your* friends fired it!"

"You must mean young Grey," thoughtfully replied Ned, startled at this proof of how bitterly earnest Zabdriel was in his war of blood. "But you cannot blame *us* with this. You were warned by him before you pledged yourself. You knew that he had saved *your* life—"

"He was one of your party," coldly replied Don Estevan. "But even admitting that," and his voice, though low, grew deep and menacing with anger, "how have you kept the truce? By trying to set my own child against me, filling her mind with poison, teaching her to defy and betray me! Enough to doom you to death a thousand times over!"

"Stop!" cried Ned, his anger running over; but then he remembered that to justify himself he must in a measure implicate Inez, and he said no more.

"I know what you would say," resumed the Californian, in a calmer voice. "I know that in a wild fit of romantic gratitude—nothing more—my daughter thought to cancel my debt of gratitude by warning you of some peril, real or visionary, it matters not now. Had the matter ended there, I should have been content to have overlooked it. But you must come spying upon my house—you lure my child into another secret interview. She is young and romantic—she is only a child, as I may say. Who you may be, I know nothing and care less; only that you are of a different religion from ours. That is a bar sufficient against all intercourse. You must pledge me your sacred honor that you will never attempt to meet her again—that you will never speak to her by word of mouth or by letter. Do this and you may go free."

"I reckon Fiery Fred'll hev a word or two to say ag'in' that," interposed Weasel, sharply.

"Give me the pledge, and I swear by my dead mother's soul that you shall go free, no matter who comes between," said Don Estevan, in a low, resolute tone, paying no attention to the interruption.

"And if I refuse?"

"You will die the death of a dog! Listen: my daughter is betrothed to the man whom you know as Fiery Fred; she gave a willing consent long before she saw you. In two days from this she will become his wife."

"That day will never come!" uttered a thrilling voice from the doorway, where Inez suddenly appeared. "I hate and loathe the creature you name so utterly that I would rather die than have a finger of his hand touch one thread of my dress! But you, my friend," and her voice softened like magic, "give me the promise he asks. You must not sacrifice your life."

"I would rather die for you than live for any one else!" impulsively cried Allen. "Remember this—dead or living, I love you."

With a furious curse Don Estevan sprang forward and smote the prisoner's lips with a force that brought the blood; but it did not hinder Ned from reading aright the glad glow that filled the maiden's eyes at his declaration.

"Look to him, men!" hissed the infuriated parent. "If he dares utter one word, blow his brains out!"

He hastened to the door and grasping the girl's arm, thrust her before him until within her chamber, when he turned the key upon her, with a grating curse, before he hastened back to the other room.

"The pesky, contrary fool wouldn't so much as open his lips!" snarled Weasel, in a tone of disgust, as though he felt himself defrauded of a deserved treat.

"Be silent!" sternly uttered Don Estevan; then turning to Allen, whose eyes were still filled with a joyous exultation. "As for you, poor fool! I tried hard to save your life, but you have committed suicide in spite of me. After these words, you shall never leave this roof alive, even though my own hand must silence your lips. And yet—bah! I am a fool for pitying you after this. I will wash my hands of the whole business. Fiery Fred will be here to-night, and I will place you in his hands, to deal with as he sees fit."

"I do not care so much what you do with me," said Ned, slowly. "I am a man, and can bear it. But for the memory of the mother that bore you! do not sacrifice your daughter to that hell-hound."

"Enough—one word more and I will be forced to have you gagged. Must I always be reminded—Go call the men, fellow. Hasten!"

Grinning with insolent cunning, Weasel did not leave his chair, but blew a shrill whistle through his fingers that speedily brought his comrades to the room. Don Estevan did not speak, but motioned them to bring the captive, and, light in hand, he led the way to an underground cell, cool but dry, in which Ned Allen was thrust, his hands still bound behind him. The heavy door clanged, the sound of footsteps gradually died away, and he found himself alone, a captive, doomed to death!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

THE gold-hunters lost little time in getting to work after Ned Allen set out upon his eventful scout. They had already lost so much time that they could ill afford to lose more. Not only were they eager to learn the extent of their riches, but rumors might spread far and wide at any hour, and a party of prospectors might stumble upon them at any moment, and where

one came others would follow, like vultures to a dead body.

This fact, too, will serve to explain why Fiery Fred was so determined in his resolve to "clean out" the entire party, since an influx of miners would render it necessary for him to abandon his present quarters for others less congenial.

Scarce half an hour after resuming work, Grumbling Dick gave a yell of delight, as he dropped upon his knees and began burrowing in the dirt with all the eagerness of a terrier scenting a rat. Eagerly the others crowded around; they knew that there could be but one cause.

"Good Lawd! jest look at them 'ar!" gasped Dick, brushing the streaming perspiration from his eyes with one hand, holding the other, cap-shaped, up before the sparkling eyes of his comrades. "Ain't them the raal beauties? an' thar's more whar they come from—you bet!"

The exultant digger had chanced upon a veritable "pocket" of gold, where the flat, smooth-worn "beans" lay nearly as thick as plums in a Christmas pudding. For the moment it seemed as though they had realized one of those marvelous tales of "gold by the mule-load!" with which veteran '49-ers were so fond of "stuffing" greenhorns, but ten minutes of eager toil sufficed to exhaust the "pocket." The result was nearly a quart of golden beans.

The excitement of this discovery brought Gospel George to their aid, though he was still stiff and sore from his wounds and bruises. Hoping with each stroke of the pick to unearth another pocket, the five men worked wonders, even after Gospel George had left them in disgust. And after a time Picard, the wounded miner, begged him to relieve him for a little while, declaring himself fit for work. But the poor fellow's will was stronger than his body, and from that time on the two men kept guard over the little pile of weapons together.

The day drew to an end, and Harry Lane began to grow anxious at the long absence of Allen. As the sun set the men quit work and returned to camp, all but Harry in high feather over their good progress and better fortune.

"Ef thar was only a bank, or a 'spress office anywhar nigh, so's we could putt the stuff in a safe place," muttered Dick, as the beans were placed with the other gold.

"They's a safer place right under your eyes, ef you'd only think so," quietly uttered Gospel George. "Jest tie the stuff up an' putt it in one o' them old iron pots, an' sink it out thar in the drink. Ef the boss was right in sayin' one o' us fellers wasn't on the squar—an' it do look that-a-way, I must say!—ef so, then the cuss couldn't levant with the gold so easy as he mought now. Jest sink it, an' putt a little float-stick to show whar."

This suggestion was eagerly seized upon. An advantage was that the women could always keep an eye upon the spot, while the men were absent at work. By the time supper was ready, the "deposit" was made to the satisfaction of all.

Harry Lane could scarcely wait for supper, so anxious was he for the safety of his friend, and catching up his weapons he started toward the pass, closely followed by Gospel George. The night was setting in, dark and almost starless, threatening a storm.

"I'm dub'ous he's got into some trouble," muttered Gospel George, as they reached the end of the pass without any discovery. "He'd never ought to went alone. Them dirty snakes of Fiery Fred's hev bin lookin' fer jest some sech chance. Afeard to tackle us fa'r an' squar', they count on pickin' us off one by one—durn sech a Injun way o' doin'!"

"If they have harmed him, there shall be a heavy reckoning!" grated Lane. "I will hunt him and his gang to the very ends of the earth but what I will have revenge!"

"An' you kin count me in, boss," quietly added Gospel George. "A whiter man never lived then him!"

Reluctantly Lane retraced his steps, knowing that nothing could be done before daylight. Closely watched as they undoubtedly were, to venture a search now would be little short of suicide.

According to the recent agreement, a council was held, but it was an empty form, since none of the party had any charges to make. After this was over, Harry Lane announced his intention to take the trail in search of their missing comrade at day-dawn, unless, happily, he should return.

The fires were allowed to die down, but there was little thought of sleeping. The unexplained absence of Ned Allen touched them too nearly. Even Gospel George was silent and evidently ill at ease.

"What was that?" suddenly cried Lane, as a slight sound broke the oppressive silence; but though all heard it, none could reply satisfactorily.

A moment later the same sound was repeated, followed by a second and a third in swift succession, not unlike the thud of heavy hail. Then a sharp cry followed—from Tom Weston, who declared that he had been hit upon the shoulder with a rock. At nearly the same instant something rolled along and was stopped by the foot

of Lane, who quickly secured it—a rough pebble, nearly the size of a hen's egg.

"It came from beyond the river," he whispered, as he announced his discovery. "Scatter out a little, but keep within sound of a whisper. There's mischief brewing."

"It's only some more durn foolin'," growled Gospel George. "Ef they meant business, they wouldn't stop to tell us they was a-comin' this-a-way. Ef it was only light enough to tell black from white, I'd fetch one o' them dirty imps ef it killed me!"

There was no reply made, for at that moment a small but brilliant light became visible upon the hillside, dancing to and fro, leaping suddenly from point to point, now remaining apparently suspended in mid-air, soon after to be whirling around in a wide circle. The miners looked sharply, but not one could detect the agency that controlled the eccentric light. No one appeared to be moving near it, and when motionless, the fire clearly lighted the rocks and bushes for twenty yards around.

"Keep a look-out behind, boys!" suddenly muttered Lane. "This may be a trick to—Ha!"

Even as he spoke, a brilliant ball of fire appeared to burst into existence almost directly above them, falling to the ground nearly in their midst, blazing fiercely and emitting an unpleasant odor.

"Look out!" screamed Gospel George, as he scrambled hastily toward the rifle-pit. "The durned thing'll bu'st, or somethin'!"

That the ball of fire was not without its mission, was soon discovered. Following the words of Gospel George almost immediately, a dozen firearms from the hillside vomited forth their contents, the shrill whistling of bullets being plainly audible to the startled miners, who for the moment were too bewildered to move.

"Take to the hole an' give 'em as good as they send!" cried Gospel George, his rifle speaking out sharply.

These words seemed to recall the miners to their senses, and all made a hasty dash for the sheltering trench, save Alf. Picard. With greater coolness than the rest, he scrambled forward and attempted to stamp out the fireball. He succeeded, but it was only to sink to the ground with a gasping groan, as another volley came from the hillside. With a cry of horrified indignation, Harry Lane left his shelter and catching the poor fellow up in his arms, bore him into the trench.

"It's no use—I've got it, here," he faintly gasped, pressing one hand to his breast, where the fatal bullet had pierced him through. "If you live—through this—my wife—tell her I didn't forget!"

The miner's voice failed him as the blood welled up in his throat. There was a gasping struggle, inexpressibly horrible to the others in that intense darkness—and then the limbs relaxed, the head fell heavily, and all present knew that one more life had been sacrificed to the manes of gold.

Gently the corpse was laid outside the trench, no longer needing its protection. Not one of the survivors spoke. Silence, too, reigned upon the hillside. The light had vanished, the rifles were stilled—darkness covered everything. Jotham Grey noiselessly crept away to reassure his women. The others kept their places within the rifle-pit, nor was a word spoken for several minutes; not until Gospel George broke out with an eager whisper:

"Look yonder! out to'rds the lone tree!"

From the direction indicated there shone a faint, hazy light, indistinct in shape. A moment later this vanished, only to reappear still nearer. And then, as the miners breathlessly watched, they could catch the faint echoes of what seemed a heavy footfall upon the springy turf.

"Git your barkers ready!" muttered Gospel George, cautiously. "They's hot work a-comin'! But don't shoot ontel I give the word—easy, now!"

As if by magic the figure of a man stood before them, scarce two-score yards distant, a bluish flame playing around him, issuing from his mouth, flickering in the gentle breeze as he steadily advanced. His face was plainly visible, and it needed not the fierce, grating curse that broke from Gospel George's lips to name him.

"Sorrel-top—Fiery Fred!" such was the cry. "Now!" yelled Gospel George, pulling trigger.

Click—click went the hammers, but not one weapon exploded! Again—and as before, only the caps were burst!

A horrible curse broke from Gospel George's lips as he flung down his pistol, and drawing a knife he sprang toward the phosphorescent figure, closely followed by the miners. For one instant it seemed as though the man meant to await their coming, but then he ran swiftly toward the lake and plunged in, head-foremost.

"He cain't git off—follow close!" yelled Gospel George.

"Stop!" thundered Lane. "It is only a trick to scatter us—back to the rifle-pit!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

GOSPEL GEORGE was the only one of the party that failed to promptly obey the command of Harry Lane. Without a moment's hesitation he plunged into the water, vanishing almost immediately from view of his comrades.

"An' that's the eend o' him!" muttered Grumbling Dick, as they once more resumed their stations in the rifle-pit. "The boss said they was a traitor 'mong us, an' now I knows it—the bigger fools we fer lettin' him blind us so long!"

"Treachery there has been," slowly responded Harry Lane; "foul and cunning treachery, but I cannot believe that Gospel George is the guilty one. What could be his object? He has fought for us, has been badly wounded—"

"I don't reckon you've ever see'd these wounds, hev you?" dryly added Barnes. "An' what was the reason our weepens didn't go off? 'cause somebody 'd doctored 'em. Who could 'a' did it? Just one o' two persons—the two as war left alone with 'em this afternoon; Gospel George an' poor dead Alf. Picard."

"It may, possibly, have been an accident," said Harry, yet evidently struck by the clearness of Grumbling Dick's reasoning. "The caps may have got wet, or have fallen off. Keep a close look-out while I see."

A hasty examination—through the sense of touch—assured Harry that the tubes were still capped. Holding the weapon close to the ground, he tried each cylinder. Two of the caps had been snapped before; the other four burst with full force.

"That settles it!" muttered Lane, sternly. "Draw closer, boys, and rig up some sort of a screen—a couple of blankets will do. Two of you hold them—so! the rest must keep a close watch. Those devils may be down upon us at any moment!"

Harry was not idle while giving these directions. Hastily collecting a few dry splinters, he struck a match and kindled a fire beneath the blankets held by his two comrades. His brow darkened as he examined his pistol. The traitor had not slurred over his work. Each tube of the weapon was crowded full of a stiff clay, yet so neatly done that the mischief could only be detected by a close examination. A stout pin speedily put the weapon in order, and then Harry turned his attention to the others. They, also, had been "doctored," but the remedy was equally as easy, and then the miners began to breathe freely once more. If the enemy intended an assault, they would be warmly received.

"What 're you goin' to do about it?" persisted Dick Barnes, as the fire was extinguished and the little party settled down once more to their dreary watch.

"What *can* be done? what proof have we against any person? True, he was left alone with the weapons; but when we were sinking the gold out yonder, all our weapons were left on shore; and neither you nor I went into the water. He might just as well accuse us two, as we him; or there is poor Picard. No, Dick, we have made mistakes enough. If he returns, we must *watch*, but say nothing. If he does not—"

A low, cautious whistle came to their ears, followed by one of the signals which had been used by them in their hunt for the person who had delivered the first message from Fiery Fred.

"Remember!" whispered Lane, warningly, as he answered the signal.

A moment later Gospel George entered the trench and silently dropped a wet, dripping object into Lane's hand. A peculiar thrill crept over the young man as he felt that it was *human hair*!

"You needn't be skeered, boss," said Gospel George, with a faint chuckle. "'Tain't no live skelp—I wish it *was*! I overtuck the pizen critter out thar, in the water, an' jest when I thought I hed him dead to rights, the thing giv' way an' he slipped me, by divin'. I hearn when he landed, an' struck after 'im, but he was too soople fer me, an' got off in the dark. You hain't none o' ye seen my pistol round here? I drapped the dratted thing when it played off on me."

"Ours did the same—we found the tubes had been plugged up with clay," quietly uttered Harry.

If Gospel George was not innocent, his astonishment was a perfect bit of acting, so much so that even Grumbling Dick did not utter a word of suspicion.

"I cain't see into it," muttered the old man. "Thar was my rifle—they hed jest as much chaine at it as t'others; an' yit *she* yelped out loud enough!"

"Didn't you wash it out, this even ng, just after supper?" suddenly asked Tom Weston.

"That's it! an' the water must 'a' soaked out the stuff!" exclaimed Gospel George. "I reckon I'm losin' my mind not to think o' that! But that don't help us any—how did the durn stuff git in thar, an' *who* putt it in? That's what we want to find out!"

"Talking will not mend the matter," interposed Harry. "Let it drop, now. To-morrow we will look it over. I think I have a clew that will lead us to the truth."

"Ef you *do* find the dirty sneak, jest let me hev the fust lick at him, boss!" begged the old man. "Only fer him I'd 'a' made sure work o' that pizen imp!"

"You think it was Fiery Fred?"

"Yes; I don't reckon thar's many men in his gang as would think o' tryin' sech a trick, even ef they *did* know our weepens hed bin fixed. S'pose we'd thought o' sech a thing a little airlier? or ef I hedn't—like a durned bull-headed fool!—emptied my rifle at them rocks over yander—whar would he 'a' bin now?"

The party soon relapsed into complete silence. The knowledge that at least one traitor was among them, and possibly even then plotting more mischief, was not an agreeable feeling, and not one of the number but eagerly welcomed the first light of day as it encircled the mountain peaks.

The dead miner was laid gently in the trench and covered with a blanket for the present. Jotham Gray joined them, saying that his brother had not been disturbed by the night alarm, and that the women would soon have breakfast ready.

Harry Lane drew Grumbling Dick aside and spoke to him earnestly. He was going out to search for some signs of Ned Allen, and Dick must take charge of the camp during his absence. Picard must be buried, though it would be better not to attempt any other work.

"Let me go 'long with you, ruther then him."

"No; I can trust you here, but I can't him. I'd rather have him under my eye, all the time. Hist! not a word!"

Gospel George approached them, showing the revolver which he had recovered. Like the rest, it had been tampered with.

"Put it in order," quietly said Lane. "We may have use for it this morning. You will go with me to look after Allen?"

Gospel George gave a prompt assent, and no more was said on the subject until after breakfast. Lane spoke to each of the men in turn and warned them to extra caution.

In silence the two men left the valley by the pass taken by Ned Allen, nor was a word spoken until Gospel George abruptly paused beside a large boulder, pointing out two clearly-defined footprints.

"They're his'n. He stopped here—leaned back ag'in' the rock—their bits o' fuzz came from his shirt. I reckon we'll take up the trail from this point, ef you're 'greeable, boss."

"You can't follow it over these rocks!" exclaimed Harry, despondently. "A horse wouldn't leave a trail!"

"It may be slow work, but I kin do it," quietly replied the old scout. "They's a heap o' things I don't know nothin' about, but they ain't follerin' a trail. It's the gift I'm proudest of. You show me one eend of a trail, an' I'll show you t'other, ef you're willin' to trust me. Which is it?"

"Go on. There is no other chance. One might hunt a month among these rocks without finding anything!"

"That *de*-pends on his style o' workin'. Now you watch me, an' you'll know somethin' more about the skience o' trailin' when we git through."

The scout seemed to forget all else in the interest of his work, stooping low as he glided along, reading the sign step by step, where, look keenly as he might, Harry could discover absolutely nothing.

"It's a gift, as I said afore," uttered Gospel George, with a low laugh, as he straightened himself to rest his back. "It's a gift, an' you hain't got it, while I hev—an' thar lays the hull difference. Ef a man ain't *born* a scout, all the practice in the world won't make him wuth shucks when it comes to pickin' up a blind trail. Ef I was only sure the boss was all right, I wouldn't ax no better fun then this kind o' work. But I'm wowedly afear'd the boy's run into trouble. Mebbe you don't know it, but this trail, ef it keeps right on, 'll lead chuck up to the shanty o' that greaser feller. You don't reckon he had any thoughts o' her?"

"He started out to look for her. That dog belonged to her, I believe," slowly replied Lane.

Gospel George made no reply, but a shade crept over his face, and from that moment on his running fire of quaint remarks ceased, nor did he speak again until, coming to where the trail grew less distinct, he handed Lane his rifle.

"You will hold that for me. I've got to do some close work here. Mind an' don't come too nigh and spyle what little chaine thar is."

Harry's suspicions, which had all along been gradually lessening, as he noted the intense earnestness displayed by the trailer, were entirely set at rest by this voluntary disarming. Surely a traitor would not so carelessly place himself utterly at the mercy of the betrayed?

Slowly but surely the keen-eyed scout picked out the trail until the difficult point was passed,

and within another half-hour he reached the ridge from which Ned Allen had caught his first glimpse of the stone building.

After a brief scrutiny, the march was resumed, the work now being comparatively easy. Ned, in running along to intercept Inez, had left a broad trail.

"I knowed it!" muttered Gospel George, as the huge boulder was reached. "The lad was led into a trap—look at the blood!"

"It may not have been his," faltered Lane, deeply moved.

In silent answer Gospel George pointed to a dark object lying half beneath a rock. Harry grasped it up, with a low groan. It was the hat worn by the missing miner.

"He may have only been wounded—he may be a prisoner," he muttered, grasping at the faintest hope.

"It may be, but I'm dub'ous. Look!" and the scout pointed to a pile of rocks hastily thrown together. "They's a dead man kivered up thar—you kin see his clo'es!"

Without a word Harry sprung forward and began tearing aside the rough stones, resolved on learning the truth, however bitter. But at that instant a crushing weight seemed to fall upon his head, and a low, taunting laugh rung in his ear; then all was blackness.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHAT A WOMAN CAN DO.

EVER since the capture of Edward Allen, and her steady refusal to bind herself as her father wished, Inez de Mendoza had been kept a close prisoner in her chamber. She was suffered to see no one save her father and the old housekeeper, who was, the Californian felt firmly assured, entirely devoted to his interests. And probably she would have justified this confidence had not gold been still dearer to her heart than fidelity. Of gold Inez had more than enough to win over her janitress to aid her in an even more dangerous plan than the one she had conceived—which was to set the young miner free. Beyond this, Inez did not dare even whisper to her own heart, though she, all the same, packed up her few little treasures and secured them about her person. If he should ask her to share his flight—and had he not said that he would rather die for her than live for any other woman?

When Inez had secured the aid of old Maria, as the housekeeper was called, she quickly learned that far greater obstacles stood in the way of her success than she had calculated upon. Fiery Fred had taken almost entire possession of the place. Such of the servants as he could not trust to implicitly obey his orders were promptly placed where they were powerless to work him mischief with either hand or tongue. Nearly two-thirds of his band were stationed at the house, with strict orders to stop all persons attempting to enter or leave the house unless he or she bore a pass signed by himself.

At this point began the work of the two women—one urged on by passionate love, the other by avarice. Inez suddenly became very ill—so ill as to seriously alarm her father and Fiery Fred. The disease baffled all their scant stock of medicinal lore; the patient seemed sinking rapidly, and the two men began to despair. Not until then did old Maria speak. She knew the disease, and she also knew the cure. Within two days the senorita should be perfectly recovered—provided she, Maria, was well paid for her trouble.

"You shall have all the gold you can hold in both hands, if you save her life!" cried Don Estevan, eagerly.

"Swear it!" muttered Maria, producing a cross from her pocket.

The oath was taken, and a substantial advance placed in her skinny paw. Then she made known her requirements. She must be allowed to go forth in search of a certain plant, the roots of which were absolutely necessary to complete a cure. That secured, she would answer for the rest.

"I myself will see you past the guard," said Fiery Fred, with a half-smile. "Otherwise some of the men might be curious enough to follow and try to learn your great secret."

Old Maria quietly accepted this proposal; a refusal would have aroused still graver suspicions in the outlaw's mind. The plan was carried out to the very letter. Fiery Fred did not allow the old woman out of his sight for one moment until she had secured the roots and was safe within the building once more. A decoction was speedily made, and Inez induced to swallow a dose. Its operation was almost magically rapid. The restless moaning and tossing ceased, and the patient sunk into a peaceful slumber. Whatever suspicions Fiery Fred may have had, were entirely banished by this, and being assured by Maria that his bride would be ready for him by the night of the morrow, kept his pledge by placing in her hands a buck-skin bag full of gold, and withdrew with the Californian to perfect his arrangements. He declared his intention to ride after the priest that afternoon, as at first intended. The man would only have to spend a few more days at

the house than he would had the bridal not been postponed.

While Inez slept Maria was at work. Through the gossip of the servants she learned which of the cells the captive was in, who was to stand guard within the building that night, and the general orders given by Fiery Fred before his departure.

Partially relieved from his fears for his daughter's safety, Don Estevan ate and drank heartily that evening; so much so, that when the major-domo entered, as usual, to ask his commands before retiring, he found his master asleep and snoring most melodiously, a half-empty glass of wine in his hand. The old servant was a bit of a philosopher, and instead of awaking the master, and thus earning a dutiful cursing, he took a long pull at the decanter and noiselessly withdrew.

Shortly afterward Inez awoke, and Maria assured her all was working well. The entire household were asleep, and there would be no difficulty in setting the captive free—the difficulty would begin only after they had left the building.

Trembling betwixt hope and fear, Inez hastened her preparations, and then with Maria, stole silently along to the stairs that led to the cells below. They did not dare take a light, lest some one of Fiery Fred's men should discover them; but old Maria was familiar enough with the passage to render such aid unnecessary. The heavy key was turned and the door flung open. A low, startled cry greeted them.

"Hush!" promptly muttered Maria; Inez was too deeply agitated for speech. "We are friends, senior, and come to save you. Take this cloak—wrap it closely around you—so. Now—here are weapons—your own knife and pistols. They are ready for use; and remember—if you are taken again, you are lost, beyond all hope. One word more. I have risked my life to save yours. If you are recaptured—which our Blessed Lady forbid!—remember that the life of an old woman depends on your silence. There—no words. Follow us and step lightly."

The young miner seemed too bewildered for speech, but grasping his weapons with a resolve not to be recaptured without a stout fight, he followed his guides up the stairs and through the darkened hall.

With a finger upon her lips, Maria opened the hall door, just wide enough for the fugitives to slip through. Then closing, but without replacing the bolts and bars, she stole silently back to her young mistress' chamber, drained a goblet standing there, and then lay down upon her pallet, a satisfied smile upon her wrinkled face. In less than five minutes she, too, was sleeping soundly.

Inez paused in the deep shade just without the door; but nothing suspicious met her ear. Then she whispered:

"Keep close to me, but do not speak a word, no matter what happens. If any one discovers us, leave me to do the talking. Now, come!"

Noiselessly she crossed the court-yard, not to the massive gate, but to a point of the wall where a light rope-ladder hung to the ground. Up this she mounted, closely followed by the young miner. There was nothing suspicious to be seen, no living being in sight. Inez changed the ladder and descended, her heart beating high with hope.

"Listen," she whispered, softly, her hand gently touching his. "There are wicked, cunning men watching all around us. If we can pass them unobserved, well and good. We will press on until you are safe with your friends. Then you and they must flee—to return, if you choose, with enough force to insure yoursafety. If we are discovered, then leave me to face them. They dare not harm me—and I care little so that you escape them. Promise me—"

"Together, alive or dead!" came an earnest whisper, as a strong hand closed upon hers.

What might possibly have become a tender scene, was abruptly checked by a low, careless whistle, apparently drawing nearer them. Crouching low down in the shadow, they awaited the result. A man passed close by them, whistling a soft tune, little dreaming how near grim death was, and leisurely strolled on, vanishing in the gloom.

"Come," whispered Inez. "Keep in the shadow of the house until we can reach those bushes. Step lightly!"

Thus far Providence had favored them almost beyond their utmost hopes; but now came the change. Just before the fugitives reached the friendly bushes, the shadowy figure of a man arose from their covert, and in a tone that showed his suspicions were aroused, demanded their business and their names.

"Silence!" muttered Inez, springing lightly before her companion; then speaking to the sentinel in the harsh, cracked tones of old Maria, she replied:

"The seniorita is worse, and I am going after a fresh supply of roots to make her another draught—"

"That's played out, pritty," coarsely laughed the fellow—none other than the keen-eyed Weasel. "You're tryin' to give the boss the shake, but 'twon't work. Back ye go—who's the boss with ye? Speak, or I'll plug ye—"

He cocked his pistol, but before it could be brought to a level, Inez sprang forward and buried a keen knife to the very hilt in his throat. Death-stricken, Weasel fell like a log, but as the pistol dropped from his nerveless hand, it exploded.

As though stupefied by what she had done, Inez stood trembling. Not so the miner. He heard a shrill whistle caught up and echoed back from a dozen different points, and knew that an instant's delay would ruin all. Passing an arm around the maiden's waist, he sprang into the bushes, and then took in the situation at a glance. There was but one hope for them. The path to the house was open, and, moreover, the shadows were deeper there. It would lead them further from the valley camp, but that might be remedied by a *detour* when once beyond hearing.

Still holding Inez, the young miner glided toward the building, and speedily had cause to congratulate himself on his promptness. A yell of mad rage came from the clump of bushes. The outlaws had found their dead comrade.

The sound seemed to arouse Inez, and the fear of capture to lend wings to their feet. Side by side the fugitives left the cover of the house and ran swiftly up the valley. For a few moments it seemed as though they would escape unseen; but then a loud yell, accompanied by several pistol-shots, told that the outlaws had sighted their game.

Dashing on, the fugitives soon entered a thinly scattered patch of bushes and stunted trees, and abruptly changing their course, hoping thus to baffle their pursuers, they glided across the valley. This ruse bade fair to succeed, as the outlaws passed on beyond the point where the trail diverged.

But the fates seemed against the fugitives. Just as they began mounting the slope, Inez stepped upon a loose stone and fell heavily, with an involuntary cry of pain. The young miner instantly lifted her in his arms, but an exultant yell from the valley told him that he was again discovered. Alone, he could have escaped with comparative ease, but in justice it must be said that not for one instant did such an idea enter his mind.

He struggled on as best he could, bearing Inez in his arms, but he knew that five minutes more would bring the infuriated outlaws upon his back. Almost despairing, he glanced around him. Just in front, crowning the low ridge, was a huge boulder. If fight he must, this would be a good point.

"Up—on top," murmured Inez, as he came to a halt.

The hint was promptly obeyed. With a desperate exertion of strength, the young miner succeeded in scaling the rock, bearing Inez upon his shoulder, and then quickly cut the vines that had aided his ascent.

"Back!" he shouted, as the leading outlaw dashed nearer. "I will kill the first man that—"

Inez uttered a loud cry, and snatched the cloak from his shoulders.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GRUMBLING DICK TO THE FRONT.

"I KNOWED it! Didn't I tell ye so? didn't I say from the very fust minnit we set eyes on the cussed, long-legged, ongainly brute that he was a fraud? Didn't I say so over ag'in when we lost our mules? An' hain't I said the same thing over an' over ag'in ten thousand times sence—that he was playin' bugs onto us? Didn't I—sa—ay?" and Grumbling Dick flung his battered old hat to the ground, stamping upon it and glaring fiercely at the three men who stood gloomily before him. "I jest did, and you cain't deny it, nuther. But no—you fellers all thought me a blunder-headed luny tick, an' that the sun jest nat'ally riz an' sot in his britches! An' now whar be ye? Whar's the cap'n—whar's Harry Lane—whar's all the rest o' the boys—whar's—"

"That's enough, Dick Barnes," interposed Tom Weston, his face flushing hotly. "What has happened is bad enough, without your crowdin' the thing into the ground. If we were careless and dull-witted, you were no better. How long has it been since you war preachin' a reg'lar sarmon over this same Gospel George?"

"The hull thing is bad enough, God knows!" interposed Jack Hoover. "Quarrelin' 'mong ourselves won't make it any better. Whar all were fooled, nobody cain't be blamed afore another. Instead of sparrin' 'bout what is past an' cain't be helped, we'd better be thinkin' of what lays afore us."

It was the evening of the day on which Harry Lane and Gospel George had set forth together in search of Ned Allen, or of some sign by which his long disappearance might be accounted for. Soon after their departure, preparations were made for the burial of poor Alfred Picard. A grave was dug close beside that other, which contained the bodies of his one-time friends and comrades, and with heavy hearts the gold-diggers lowered the lifeless clay to its last earthly home. Sad as had been the former burial, this was even more gloomy, though there were no words spoken, no tears shed. Yet each heart

was heavy and sick. How long before they would be even as he? The shadow of death seemed hanging over them, descending, slowly but surely.

Was there a curse upon that valley of gold? Truly, it seemed so. Since their first entrance nothing had prospered with them. Riches almost incalculable surrounded them; but was it worth all the blood that had been shed in its defense?

These reflections and others scarcely more cheerful filled the minds of the four men who remained within the valley. Even had it been prudent, not one of them could have wielded pickax or spade that day.

A gleam of comfort came to Jotham Grey as he found how much better his wounded brother seemed after his peaceful slumber, and he managed to persuade his mother to lie down and take a little much-needed rest. Minnie Brady, too, appeared much more like her usual self, and there was good hope that her youthful spirit would soon recover from the terrible shock it had received when her betrothed was murdered in her very arms.

The hours crept on, and the day drew near its close, without anything occurring to break the almost painful monotony. And with each hour that passed without the return of either Harry Lane or Ned Allen, the doubts and suspicions of the watchers grew stronger until they became almost certainty.

"Ef it is so, what'll we do?" Jotham finally asked.

"I bin thinkin'," slowly responded Barnes. "Only fer them," and he nodded toward the women, "the thing would be plain enough, fur's I'm consarned. I'd jest take the trail, an' stick to it ontel I'd taken pay fer them boys, or got rubbed out myself. But ef we did this, what would they do? Fiery Fred would nab'em up, an' you kin easy guess what would foller that! No, we must look after them, fust. We've got to leave this hole. We couldn't make much of a fight ef them imps o' Satan should come down on us—as they mean to, sure. I think I know a place we kin take to, whar we could hold out ag'in a army. I found it the day the cap'n an' me was out lookin' fer some signs o' that pesky Gospel George. It's a sorter cave, small, but big a-plenty fer our party. You'll take to that, an' I'll start out after help. At the furderest I won't be gone more'n two days—"

"But the gold!" muttered Jotham, his eyes sparkling with covetousness. "If you bring any one here they will find out—they will want a share—"

"Which is worth the most to you—gold, or them thar?" cried Dick, in a tone of disgust. "You'd sell your wife an' children, an' mother, an' brother, an' sister—"

"No—I didn't mean that," muttered Grey. "An' yit—it's mighty hard to give it all up, after it's cost us so much—almighty hard!"

"They'll be a plenty fer all, never fear; an' better a small share than vuss then nothin'. I'll make the best barg'in I kin, but I've got to tell the hull thing ef we count on gittin' a party to leave thar diggin's to sarve us."

The matter was thoroughly discussed in all its bearings. Even Jotham Grey couldn't help seeing that it would be little short of suicide for their terribly-weakened party to attempt to hold the valley any longer. Now that he had only four men to deal with, it was not likely that Fiery Fred would wait much longer before putting his threats into execution.

"Ef it's got to be, then the sooner the better," finally said Jotham. "I reckon you kin find this hole in the dark?"

"I could, easy enough; but I don't reckon we'll try that. Ef we're watched—which I don't allow thar's much doubt on—how fur do you reckon we would travel afore we run into a andbush?"

"They could see us so much the better by day."

"An' so could we see them. The women couldn't travel over sech a trail, let alone him. Besides, thar's a chance that Harry may come back yit. We'll git everything ready fer a airy start, an' then wait fer day. An' one o' the fust things—I reckon we'd better haul up our gold. You'll keep the heft on't with you, of course, but a specimen o' it 'd go a long ways in provin' I was tellin' a straight yarn."

As this point was agreed upon, Tom Weston flung off his outer garments and swam out to where the floating bit of wood indicated the position of the sunken gold. With the string in his mouth he swam back to where he could touch bottom, then pulled up the iron pot and waded to shore. Within the pot was a package done up in a square of canvas, securely tied; but Grumbling Dick uttered a yell of rage and astonishment as he felt the weight of this. The cloth was torn off—revealing a dozen pebbles—nothing more!

And then the truth flashed upon them. This was what Gospel George had accomplished when in the lake, pretending pursuit of the disguised outlaw! He had removed the gold, replacing it with stones, so that the theft would not be discovered on a casual examination.

And then it was that Grumbling Dick course forth with the tirade that heads this chapter.

All doubts now were settled. Gospel George was indeed a traitor, and doubtless he had lured Harry Lane on to his death. Bitter and deep were the curses showered upon his head before the miners cooled down again.

Malachi Grey was told all that had occurred, in as few words as possible, and declared that he was quite strong enough to bear removal, though his mother still doubted, though she knew that it was their only chance.

Waiting until the darkness was deep enough to conceal their occupation, the miners quickly formed a stout litter with pieces of the wagon-bed and cover. Grumbling Dick carefully looked over the horses, which were still staked out beside the lake, but though there were several fine animals among them, he decided that Roxy Ann, the tough little mule, would best serve him over the rocky trail he expected to follow. Bringing her up, he tied her securely to the wagon lest the outlaws should attempt to stampede the animals during the night.

The vigil, though tedious, was an uninterrupted one, and when day fairly dawned it found the little party across the river and slowly toiling up the steep hillside. Jotham and Hoover bore the litter upon which rested the wounded youth, and beside them walked the women. Just ahead was Weston, while Grumbling Dick acted as head scout, ranging rapidly from side to side with keen eyes that seemed everywhere at the same time. He hoped that their sudden movement would take the watchers, if any such there were, by surprise, but still there was the possibility of an ambush, and he was resolved to run no unnecessary risk.

The ridge was passed without any incident worthy of remark, though more than one paused for a moment to cast a backward glance at all they were leaving: the graves of friends and kindred, and all the glad hopes buried with them.

Nearly two more miles had been passed, when Barnes paused and pointed behind them. Two columns of dense black smoke were rising from the ridge that overlooked the golden valley.

Their flight had been discovered, and these signal smokes were sent up to spread the news to the scattered band of Fiery Fred.

In stern silence the fugitives pressed on, knowing that every moment was precious, and that the bloodhounds would soon be upon their trail; yet their progress was slow, for Malachi began to show the effects of fatigue.

At length, with a long-drawn breath of relief, Grumbling Dick halted, pointing to the face of a steep hill just before them. A clump of vine-clad bushes grew upon a little narrow shelf or platform-like ledge, which he declared concealed the entrance to the cave.

"Quick, now!" he cried. "Up with the litter—or them imps 'll cut me off yit!"

"You strike out now—we kin manidge alone, an' ef you don't git through we're all gone!" urged Jotham.

But Barnes persisted in seeing all safe before he left, though he speedily had cause to regret it. The party once within the cave he descended and mounted Roxy Ann, trotting rapidly down the valley; but three men sprung out before him, firing rapidly. Breathlessly the occupants of the cave looked on. They saw Dick wheel abruptly and make a desperate dash up the hillside. They saw other shots fired—and with horror in their hearts, saw the bold digger reel in his saddle, then sink forward upon the neck of his animal.

Tom Weston sprung out to his assistance, but a bullet grazed his temple as several rough clad men rushed forward to meet him, and he reluctantly retired.

Still the outlaws came on, but now the pistols of the miners opened a brisk fire. One of the assailants fell dead, another one limped into the bushes with a yell of angry pain, while the remainder sought the nearest cover.

Grumbling Dick could not be seen from the cave, but they feared the worst.

CHAPTER XXXII. TOUCHING A HEART.

TOILING along under the hot, perpendicular rays of the sun with the heavy, inelastic tread of one foot-sore and travel-worn, a man was making his way along the narrow valley that led to the cross-range containing the retreat of Fiery Fred's band of outlaws and refugees.

The man plodded on, as it might be, doggedly, looking neither to the right nor the left, scarcely even glancing ahead further than a few feet. His appearance was wretched in the extreme, and a footpad's nose would have been elevated in disgust at the impudence of such a person daring to travel through his realms.

The man was old, as evidenced by the long, tangled locks of hair, falling from beneath a ragged red handkerchief, the only covering for his head. The hair was of a grizzly gray, sun-burnt and ill kept. What little could be seen of his face, which was half enveloped in a dirty, blood-stained rag, was deeply bronzed and wrinkled.

From beneath the heavy, overhanging brows, small eyes peered forth with almost preternatural keenness. His lower dress was little better than one mass of rags, fluttering in every

breeze, bearing unmistakable traces of long exposure to wind and weather. His feet were bare, bruised and bleeding, and he limped painfully as he walked. Across his left arm was resting a long, rusty musket, flint-locked and apparently in the last stages of destruction, only held together with bits of wire and cord.

Such was the forlorn-looking object which Tom McKeown, one of Fiery Fred's most trusted men, had been watching for the last ten minutes from his vine-wreathed perch among the overhanging rocks.

"Some played-out tramp—I'll let him pass by if he doesn't take too much notice," muttered the sentinel; but at that moment the stranger came to a halt, his eyes flashing keenly around him, finally resting upon the very point where McKeown was then crouching; and then, as if satisfied, the man uttered a peculiar whistle, twice repeated.

McKeown looked puzzled, but answered the signal with promptness. The stranger had evidently expected this, for he seemed in no wise astonished as he fumbled among his rags, finally producing a dirty scrap of paper which he held up before him, saying in Spanish:

"From the captain; come and look."

McKeown rapidly descended from his perch, and opening the soiled missive saw that it was from Fiery Fred, an order to pass the bearer wherever he chose to go.

"When did the captain give you this? and where was he?" demanded the guard, still in doubt.

"Yesterday; at the house of Don Mendoza," was the prompt reply, still in Spanish. "He sent me here with a message to his wife—she is here?"

"One of them is," replied Tom, with a half-laugh.

"The one—he called her Little Paquita," quickly added the stranger, his eyes glowing like twin coals.

"She is here; but I don't envy you your duty, old man. The little queen is in a delightful humor, and if you are wise you will look out for breakers," laughed McKeown. "Go on. Follow that narrow path yonder, and you'll be all right," he added, uttering a shrill, quavering whistle as a notice to those within the den that they might expect a duly accredited visitor.

Without reply the old man toiled wearily up the steep ascent, pausing when he reached the little ledge before the clump of bushes that had been trained to hide the cave entrance, and glanced back to the point to which the sentinel had already returned. A wave of the hand bade him enter, and hesitating no longer, the stranger obeyed.

At first his eyes could distinguish nothing, though he could hear the sound of shuffling footsteps and of low mutterings, but he soon became accustomed to the dim light, and then saw that he was being curiously regarded by half a dozen men.

"They's a circus bu'sted loose, an' yar's the head monkey, boys!" laughed one of the outlaws.

"It don't make a dif of bitterness—monkey, kangaroo or man-critter—a rule's a rule, an' he's got to tackle the king o' the walk afore he goes one step furdur!" roared a huge, red-haired, yet not unpleasant-looking fellow, had he been a little more sober. "You hear that, uncle? You must throw me or git throwed afore you go one step furdur—their's the rules an' regulations. Take your ch'ice o' holts; collar an' elbow, side-holt or snatch-grab—which is it?"

"I bring a word from *el capitan*," hesitated the stranger, casting a half-bewildered glance around him.

"Cap'n be durned! they ain't no cap'n yer ontel the rules an' regulations is done up brown. Thar—don't git scared—I'll pick out a soft place an' lay ye down—jest as easy! It's all in fun, ye know. They ain't nobody goin' to hurt ye. Putt down your cannon—so! Now ketch hold an' try to lay me on my— Good Lawd!"

With a strength and activity that did not seem possible in one so worn and old, the stranger accepted the hold offered him by the wrestler, and fairly flung the huge fellow over his shoulder. The outlaw fell fairly upon his head, and lay, stunned and quivering, until his comrades picked him up and poured a half-pint of whisky down his throat. The liquor quickly effected its work, and arising, though still unsteady upon his feet, the crestfallen bully offered his hand to the stranger.

"Good-by, stranger. I'm goin' out an' blow myself to thunder! They ain't no use in livin' when a little bag o' bones like you kin chuck a man like me eendways—an' not hafe try!"

"My foot slipped, senior, and you fell over me," said the stranger, with a low bow. "I am sorry if you have hurt yourself any—it was a very clumsy accident on my part. You will pardon me?"

"Ef I didn't think so, all the time!" eagerly exclaimed the wrestler. "Le's try it over ag'in!"

"Not just now—another time, senior. I have a message from the captain to—Little Paquita. He was very particular. I was to place it in her hands as soon as possible; but I do not see her—"

"Come on—I'll show you whar she is," said the good-natured giant. "But mind you keep ready to dodge. She's in the most blessedest humor! I jest went in thar to ax would she like anything, an' dog my cats ef she didn't jest chuck a big knife right at me! Ef it ain't good news you bring, fri'nd, you don't want to git so cluss to her you can't dodge. Them little wimmen is the pizenest critters you ever see when they oncet bile over."

The old man made no reply to the remarks of his loquacious companion, nor did he speak until the giant pointed out a faint glimmering light that apparently shone through the crack left by a partially opened door.

"You'll find her in thar, stranger; but mind—"

"I'll be careful. I hope it is good news I bring her. But do not you wait here in the damp; it may not agree with you after that unlucky tumble."

The giant hesitated for a moment, but then turned to retrace his steps. The stranger smiled faintly as he saw the man shake his head with a puzzled air.

When the shuffling footsteps had died away, the old man stealthily approached the door, and listened breathlessly. He could just distinguish the muffled sound of sobs, and paused for a moment, his head bowed as if in deep thought.

Then he gently opened the door, wide enough to admit his person, and entering, he closed the door behind him, turning the key in its massive lock, his eyes fixed upon the form of a woman, who lay upon a low couch in the further corner.

The click of the lock, faint as it was, aroused the woman, who, with a glad cry, sprung to her feet. But the sudden change that came over her face told how bitterly she was disappointed in her visitor.

"Who are you? how dare you come in here unsummoned?" she cried, her voice trembling with anger, her eyes flashing.

"I am the bearer of a message, lady—"

"From him? oh, give it me!" cried Little Paquita, her face lighting with joy. "Quick—oh, haste!"

"It is not from him," said the stranger, slowly, as if speaking with difficulty. "I do not come from the man you—"

"Then why are you here? There is no one else from whom I will receive a message—so go! or I will call for those who will know how to punish—"

"Call them, then—call them and finish the work you have begun so well!" cried the stranger, in a stern, ringing voice as he drew his tall form erect and tore the bandage from his face.

Little Paquita started back as though one risen from the dead had confronted her, covering her face with her hands and sinking to her knees. The old man made one step toward her, with outstretched hands, but as suddenly recoiled, while the hard, stern expression returned to his face as he heard the words:

"Save me—he will kill me, Leon!"

"Yes, I have a message for you; I have walked many a weary mile to deliver it, and you must listen to me, now that we are met, face to face. It comes from the home you left—the home where all was so happy and blessed until he came, like a beautiful, poisonous serpent of evil. He found you young, innocent and blessed in the pure love of your father and mother, who cherished you as the very apple of their eyes. They were simple people, and thought no evil when the handsome stranger begged for a night's lodging. They made him welcome, and honored him as best they could. He stayed on, day after day, for his health, he said. The two poor old fools learned to love him almost as their own child, and when he and their daughter would stroll off together, they would smile and nod to each other, and laugh softly, for it reminded them of the days gone by, when they were young, and everything was pleasant and bright around them. You see what fools they were? They believed in man's truth and honor, in the love and obedience of their child. And how was their confidence and trust rewarded? The handsome stranger stole away their child—leading her to a life of dishonor—and broke her poor old mother's heart!"

"The father," continued the old man, in the same hard, metallic voice, "searched far and wide for the fugitives, but in vain. He only learned that the man was a notorious outlaw—one whose heart was black and foul as his hands were red with innocent blood. And the mother? Day by day she faded until she could no longer sit at the door and watch with aching eyes for the daughter who had forgotten her—"

"No—no!" moaned Paquita. "Not forgotten—"

"Not forgotten?" sternly cried the old man. "Not forgotten, and you are here, while she is dying—dying, with the vain prayer constantly upon her lips that she may once more behold you—that her loved child may return in time to close her eyes and receive one last kiss in token of forgiveness?"

"I cannot leave him—oh! father!" cried Paquita, lifting her head. "You do not know how dear he is to me! I would die without his love!"

"His love—poor, silly fool!" and the old man

voice faltered as he spoke the words. "His love you never had—only a hot, short-lived, devouring passion. If he loved you, would you be here, alone, weeping for his return?"

"It is business calls him away," muttered the woman.

"Ay! and what business? that of leading another young soul to ruin! Child, will your eyes never open? Do you not know that this very night the man you fancy you love, is to wed another?"

"It is false!" cried Paquita, springing to her feet.

"It is true—I swear it by the soul of your dying mother!" solemnly uttered the old man.

"He is to marry the daughter of Don Estevan de Mendoza this very night. The priest is there, and all is ready. If you do not believe me—if you think your father is a perjured liar, come with me and put his truth to the test. And then—"

"And then I will die," murmured Paquita, her head sinking.

"No. Then you will remember that she is waiting to give you, her repenting child, a mother's holy kiss of forgiveness before she dies. You will come home with me, Paquita, and we will live for each other—"

"But if he is still true to me?" pouted the woman.

"Then you shall choose between us—I will not try to force your will," was the sad response.

"Swear that you have told me the truth—that there is no mistake—swear it upon this cross, and I will go with you!" cried Paquita, plucking the sacred emblem from her bosom and holding it up before her father.

In silence he accepted the symbol, pressing it reverently to his lips. Paquita pressed her hands over her eyes tightly, then, in a voice that sounded strangely calm, she said:

"I will go with you—at once. Only—I have one duty to perform, first. Wait for me here. I will not be long."

Taking a stout knife and brace of pistols, with ammunition, from the wall, she left the room and was absent for several minutes. Then she returned, and slipping on a plain, coarse dress over her short petticoat, motioned her parent to follow her.

When in the outer chamber, she ordered one of the men to saddle two horses at once and bring them around to the front, simply stating that the captain had bade her come to him without delay.

Though evidently puzzled, the men dare not disobey, and five minutes later father and daughter were riding rapidly away from the mountain retreat.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GAME TO THE LAST.

As her companion shouted forth his loud defiance to the pursuing outlaws, Inez uttered a gasping cry of wonder—almost of horror; for the voice was not that of the man whom she had risked all to save—not the voice of Edward Allen! For an instant the discovery seemed to paralyze her, but then, with a shrill scream she sprung to his side, and snatched the muffling cloak from his shoulders, and peered eagerly into his face.

A bitter groan broke from her lips as she sunk to the rock, covering her face with both hands. Her suddenly aroused suspicions were too true—the man whom she had rescued was not Edward Allen—was an utter stranger to her!

The young man stared at her in anxious surprise, that was well-nigh becoming fatal. Until now she had borne up so bravely, had seemed so free from womanly weakness, that he could think of only one cause for such a sudden breakdown; that one of the many bullets aimed at them during their flight had taken effect upon her person. With this fear, he took one step toward her, when a point of fire seemed drawn swiftly across the back of his head, causing his brain to reel, his limbs to tremble, until it seemed as though he was falling. But the triumphant yell that rung out from the hillside, while it told him how that one step had saved his brain from being bored by the death-dealing bullet, roused him to stern, desperate action. Twice his revolver spoke, and once, at least, with good effect, as the shrill, unearthly yell of agony bore ample evidence.

As if by magic the outlaws vanished among the numerous shadows, crouching behind boulders or bushes, peering eagerly forth in hopes of a chance to pick off the defender of the rock without further risk to themselves. But with his second shot the young man had crouched low down, and was no longer visible from the hillside.

A keen, earnest glance around had convinced him that there was but one way in which the outlaws could carry his position, unless they were content to await the slow method of starvation, and that was by scaling the rock itself, since there was no point within rifle range that commanded the top of the table-rock. Satisfied of this, he knew that his best chance was to wait for the growing impatience of the out-

laws should urge them to an assault, when the struggle would be on more even terms.

"I am afraid you are injured, lady," he said, softly. "Can I do nothing for you?"

"Who are you?" suddenly demanded Inez, lifting her head. "And where is he—the man whom I thought I was saving?"

"Bow your head lower, lady—those scoundrels might mistake you for me in this dim light."

"Who are you—are you afraid to answer?" cried the maiden, impatiently.

"My name is Harry Lane. I see no reason why I should deny it," quietly replied the young miner. "If there has been a mistake, I do not think you can blame me, lady, when you hear my story. I remember you—you were at our camp in the valley, the other day. My best friend disappeared strangely, and I started out to look for him. We found his grave, and over it the man who was with me treacherously knocked me senseless. When I came to, I was in a dark cell. Then you came and set me free. You may remember I was bidden to keep silence, and I obeyed. How was I to know that you were acting under a delusion?"

"It was my fault," said Inez, slowly. "I should have made sure; but I did not know there were two captives—"

"Two—and the other—the one you thought you were saving—you know his name?" eagerly demanded Harry Lane.

"They called him Edward Allen—"

"Alive! thank God! and that treacherous scoundrel made me believe him dead—murdered!"

"He will be—they have sworn his death, and I, his only friend, am here, unable to help him!" fumed Inez, wringing her hands in an agony of grief.

Harry was silent, for indeed he knew not what to say to comfort her. Though the imposition had been an unconscious one on his part, he felt the mistake none the less keenly, and could it have been done, he would not have hesitated a moment in exchanging places with his friend. And yet—as he heard the low signals passing from one to another of the outlaws below—would the gain have been so great, on Allen's side? Would he not just as surely be doomed to death here, as in yonder cell?

"At least, he would die fighting for one who loves him," he muttered, as he listened to the painful, heartbreaking sobs of the young woman beside him.

Gradually the sobbing grew fainter, and presently Inez, as she crouched low upon the rock, seemed to fall asleep, as Harry believed. He was glad of this, for it gave him time to think. One by one he weighed his chances, and his heart sunk lower as he saw how faint they were. Not alone for himself, though life was sweet; but if he were killed, what would become of this woman—of Ned Allen? Once free, he could hasten for help, buying it with the price of their golden secret; but how could he escape? It seemed an impossibility.

While thus reflecting, he had kept both his eyes and ears open, knowing that he had bold and desperate men to deal with. Several times he had heard a low, shuffling sound, as if some person was cautiously circling round the huge boulder, and now the noise was repeated twice at the same point. Lying flat along the rock, Harry kept glancing around him, with finger upon his revolver trigger, convinced that the crisis was near at hand. His position brought the edge of the rock in bold outline against the dusky clouds, so that he had a clear view in every direction.

For nearly half an hour longer all was still. Then, with a thrill of fierce delight, the young miner caught sight of a hand as it grasped the edge of the bank almost directly before him. With leveled revolver, he waited in breathless suspense, all unconscious of what was going on behind him.

Just as in front, a stout hand grasped the edge of the rock, but there was less delay in the head's following it. A shaggy head suddenly shot up into view, and another hand leveled a cocked revolver at the unconscious miner's back. But at that critical moment Inez sprung into sudden life—her white hand appeared from beneath the folds of her cloak—there was a blinding flash, a sharp report, and with a stifled yell of agony the outlaw fell heavily back, a bullet through his jaws, his pistol exploding as he fell, its leaden contents speeding harmlessly through the air.

At the same instant a dark face arose before Lane, but as quickly disappeared, its skull shattered by his bullet. The attack had been made and repulsed almost before the young miner could realize that Inez had again saved his life. For, though they yelled and cursed fiercely enough, the fall of two of their boldest fellows cowed the assailants for the time being.

"Only for you—" began Harry, his voice trembling.

"It was nothing," coldly interrupted Inez. "They are my enemies as much as yours. Though I know they would not dare harm one hair of my head, I would sooner die a thousand times rather than fall into their power again."

"And yet," hesitated Harry. "They would take you back home—and he is there. You might have a chance to set him free, as you did me."

"No—there could only be one such chance, and that I have wasted. I would be watched too closely, until it was too late. If you knew—listen: I will tell you all. To-morrow—or rather to-night, for it must be nearly day, now—to-night I was to be forced into a marriage with the man whom you know as Fiery Fred. He was to be there—bound—you can guess why, after what I attempted to do this night. And after that—when he had been tortured enough to satisfy that demon, he was to have been murdered. My return, as his captive, would be the signal for your comrade's death, but while I am free, that fiend will keep him alive in hopes of finally carrying out his plans, as I have told them. This is why I shot that scoundrel, not simply to save your life."

"You are still blaming me with that unfortunate mistake," said Harry, quietly. "You will learn to know me better, some time. I will say no more, now; only that while I live you shall never fall into their hands. When I can do no more, may the good Lord guide and protect you!"

Neither spoke again until after day had dawned, nor was there any further disturbance made by the outlaws. Harry felt an almost uncontrollable longing to rise up for at least one glance around him, though reason told him that such an action would be little less than suicide. Nothing was more unlikely than that the outlaws had abandoned the siege as in vain.

The sun was beginning to peer down upon them from over the mountain-top, when a clear voice was heard, hailing them. Inez raised her head quickly, her eyes flashing.

"It is he—Fiery Fred!" she muttered, cocking her pistol.

"You might as well answer," continued the outlaw chief. "I know you are there. Don't be a fool, Harry Lane, and throw away your last chance."

"I have only one word to say to such a contemptible scoundrel as you; and that is spoken best through my revolver—the sooner the better!"

"You haven't forgotten how nicely I played Gospel George on you all at the valley camp, eh? Well, it was a shame to take advantage of such verdant greenhorns; but that is past. What I want to say is this. You have a young lady up there, who is my wife—"

"A lie—black as your own heart!" cried Inez, boldly springing to her feet and leveling her revolver.

But Fiery Fred, bold though he undeniably was, was not chivalrous—or foolish—enough to stand still to be shot down by a woman, and sprung quickly behind a convenient boulder, laughing derisively as a bullet whistled harmlessly past his head. Inez glanced quickly around, but there was no one in sight, and she quietly resumed her former position.

"Now that little by-play is over," called out Fiery Fred, "perhaps you will listen to what I have to say. I have twenty men here, who only await my signal to take you. But I know that some of them will get hurt, and I am so very tender-hearted that I prefer to spare their lives, if possible. So, to that end, I make you an offer. Throw down your weapons and surrender, and I pledge my honor you shall be free to go where you will in four and twenty hours from this. Refuse, and you shall die, if it costs a dozen lives to rub you out!"

"I will surrender—on one condition," coolly replied the young miner.

"And what is that?" eagerly cried Fiery Fred.

"That you show your beautiful figurehead above this rock long enough for me to speak one word to you—through the mouth of my revolver!"

A bitter, grating curse was the only answer; and then all was still for a few moments. Harry looked to his weapons, feeling sure that he would soon have occasion to use them. Nor was he mistaken. Fiery Fred gave the signal, and his men rushed boldly up to the rock, scaling it on every side. Crouching low down, back to back, Inez and Harry coolly picked off the first two or three, but even this did not check the stubborn charge, and despite their utmost efforts, several of the outlaws succeeded in gaining a foothold upon the rock, and Lane was forced to arise to meet them. For this Fiery Fred had been waiting, and his pistol spoke out viciously. With a wild cry, the young miner fell back, and was brutally kicked from the rock by one of the ruffians, while his companions succeeded in disarming Inez.

Fiery Fred received the maiden in his arms as she was lowered from the rock, bidding one of his men look after Lane. The ruffian quickly returned, wiping his knife.

"He's dead enough, cap'n; but to make sure, I jest lent him the len'th o' my knife," he grinned, in high glee.

"And now—back to the house! we'll have our wedding after all!" laughed Fiery Fred, with devilish exultation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WEIRD BRIDAL.

THE usually quiet household of Mendoza was all bustle and confusion as the night fell. As Fiery Fred observed, one did not get married every day, and his bold fellows should not lack the wherewithal to eat and drink success to his merry wedding. The spacious court, well lighted, was given over to the men. Blankets were spread upon the ground, and upon them were piles of food, and almost every kind of drinking vessel the house could afford, from cut glass down to horn and leather cups, gave ample conveniences for emptying the skins of wine, mezel, brandy or whisky, all of which had been provided with an unusually liberal hand—"jest as though the cap'n was bound they shouldn't none on us turn in sober," laughed Devil's Dan.

Fiery Fred smiled darkly as he left them. All was working as he desired. Passing along, he entered a room where two men were sitting over their wine, in silence. One was Don Estevan, pale and evidently ill at ease, with dark circles around his eyes that told of restless nights and troubled thoughts. The other was a cowed and tondured priest, gross and unwieldy in form, cunning and sensual in countenance.

Fiery Fred, a broad, black patch upon one cheek, and his head still bandaged, coolly sat upon the table's edge between the two men, swinging one foot carelessly to and fro as he spoke:

"Well, Padre Ignatio, I hope this gentleman has fully satisfied your scruples. It will save us both some trouble."

"It was only my duty, senior," muttered the priest, with an uneasy, sidelong glance. "My humble services are at your disposal whenever you desire them."

"And that is at once. You see I am an impatient bridegroom," with a mocking laugh. "Go see that the lady is ready, Mendoza. Now, my good friend," he added as the Californian left the room, "one last word to you. I have especial reasons for wishing this ceremony to be strictly legal, according to the rules of your church. You have been told that the lady is a little bashful, and may occasionally mistake the responses; but that need make no difference to you. Perform your duty well, and you will be a dozen ounces richer—fail, and I will give the holy church one more martyr. You understand?"

The priest nodded, and filled himself another glass of wine. Fiery Fred laughed mockingly as the trembling hand spilled a portion of the liquor. He knew that the holy padre would take care not to cross his will.

"Come," said the outlaw, arising. "I hear their door open. They must not find us absent."

Together the two men crossed the hall and entered a brilliantly-lighted room beyond. At one end stood a narrow table, impiously decorated as an altar. The wall behind was hung with religious symbols, and lighted by tall waxen tapers. Fiery Fred cast an approving glance over these, then turned to where the form of a man was half reclining in an easy-chair. His garments were torn and stained with blood and dirt. His long hair was tangled and stiff with the blood that had flowed from an ugly-looking cut upon his head. His jaws were painfully distended with a stout gag; his limbs were wound around with rawhide thongs, but despite this, the eyes of the captive plainly shot forth the bold defiance and deadly hatred his lips were forbidden to utter.

"This, padre, is one of my dearest and most trusted friends, who has kindly consented to act as one of the witnesses to my marriage. As you see, he is a kind of an invalid, which makes his kindness all the greater. Ah! here comes the fair bride!"

Ghastly pale, her eyes dull and almost expressionless, Inez entered the room, leaning heavily upon the arm of Don Estevan. Fiery Fred stepped lightly to her side, and drew her hand within his arm. She raised her eyes at this, but the vacant expression of her face did not change. She acted like one under the stupefying influence of some powerful drug. The outlaw looked at her keenly, then suddenly bent his head and touched his lips to hers. Inez did not even start, nor attempt to avoid the caress, though she, as if mechanically, passed her kerchief across her lips the moment after.

Fiery Fred drew a long breath, and cast a glance of satisfied triumph at Don Estevan as he muttered:

"You have done well—I will not forget, when our time for settlement comes."

"See that you don't!" hissed the Californian, intense hatred flashing from his eyes. "You have driven me to the wall—if you are not a fool, you will not try to drive me further."

"You have the right to grumble, if it makes you feel any better," laughed the outlaw, carelessly, passing on and gently placing Inez in a chair facing that to which Edward Allen was bound hand and foot.

"You will have patience, father, for a few minutes. Eager as I naturally am to claim my bride, I have a brief confession to make first. Be seated: I will not detain you long."

As he spoke, Fiery Fred drew a chair close

beside Inez and sat down, one arm resting upon the back of her chair, his fingers toying carelessly with her glossy hair. His lips parted with a mocking smile as he saw the big veins start out upon the young miner's forehead. He knew that his devilish torture had begun.

"I said I had a confession—or an explanation, whichever you please—to make to you, Captain Edward Allen, and as I wish to start my wedded life with a clear conscience and an unburdened mind, I have chosen this opportunity to make it."

"You remember the time that Gospel George left your camp to investigate the meaning of those signal-fires which my men kindled? You also remember searching for him, and finding a body which you believed was his? You were right. That was his body, and he was killed by my men, after his giving me this love-token," touching the black patch upon his cheek, "and putting another bullet through my side—here; all of which goes to show spying is not the safest occupation in the world. And yet—the death of this meddling fellow gave me an idea—a bright one, if I do say it myself. It was to play the part of Gospel George, and by this means dispose of your party easier than by hard fighting. A prudent general, you know, is merciful to his men, though recruits are easily gained for pleasant work like mine."

"Well, I 'made up' as Gospel George, and you know how I introduced myself—and what a pleasant interview I cut short. You may thank my wife, here, that you are alive now, for I freely admit that I intended to make short work of you at that moment. But her interference gave me time to think, and I concluded to play my hand out as I at first intended."

"You remember the note which was so mysteriously delivered that evening? I had prepared it beforehand, and simply snapped it up into the air while talking. With equal ease I posted the other messages, and watching my chances, I knotted your hair around that dagger, though I must admit that I did not count on your recognizing it."

"You remember the agreement that I was to work on my own hook—to come and go as I chose. This fact made it easy for me to prepare notes, to make all arrangements with my men for carrying out their part of the play, and to agree upon signals which I could give without suspicion on your part. It was by my orders that you were captured and brought here—for this especial occasion. Then I hastened to wind up my work at the valley camp. I agreed to cast up a fire-ball—arranged by McKeown, one of my men who was formerly a pyrotechnician of no little skill—that should burst in the air, and by its light, your friends were to be picked off, one by one. During that day I managed to 'doctor' all the firearms in camp," and he then gave a minute detail of all that had occurred in camp the night after Allen had been taken captive. How one of his men, disguised as "Sorrel-top," and covered with phosphoreted ether, played the part of flaming ghost, and how he, in pretended pursuit, had secured the sunken treasure."

"In the morning I accompanied your friend, Harry Lane, in search of you. I led him to the spot where you were captured, and while he was trying to unearth the body of the man whom you killed, I gently knocked him on the head and had him put in one of the cells just below us. He managed to escape last night—thanks to my lady here, who fancied she was liberating you—but my lads kept too close a watch, and he was killed."

"Meanwhile, your friends in the valley began to think that neighborhood was slightly unhealthy, and pulled up stakes. They were followed and run into a little cave, Grumbling Dick getting knocked over in an attempt to escape. My boys sent me word—I replied to *rub them out*. As the easiest way, they just undermined a huge rock and rolled it directly before the narrow entrance; then covered all with a pile of brushwood and set it on fire. As none of the party have succeeded in digging their way through the rock, as yet, I guess they have concluded to make a stay of it. So you see that I have kept my threats to the very letter—save in *your* case; and a few minutes more will settle even *that* point. Now, padre," he added, gently lifting Inez to her feet, "we are ready. Please perform the ceremony."

Pale and trembling with horror at the recital of such atrocious crimes, the priest dare not refuse, and standing behind the mock altar, he blundered through the ceremony. Whenever it became necessary for Inez to signify her assent, the Californian gently bent her head with his hand. Like a beautiful but senseless automaton, she made no resistance, seemingly ignorant of the sacrifice; nor did a muscle of her countenance change when the priest pronounced them lawful man and wife, and added a mumbled blessing at a sharp glance from Fiery Fred.

The bridegroom stooped to salute the bride, when a wailing, heart-breaking sob startled him, and glancing quickly around, a furious curse burst from his lips as he caught sight of two figures just within the door—an old, gray-haired man, and a kneeling woman.

"Paquita! you here!" he faltered, for once fairly taken aback, and losing his boasted self-possession.

"Ay!" replied the old man, in a deep tone. "Here to see with her own eyes how truly you keep your vow to love and cherish her—to brand you as a treacherous villain—"

"Who admitted you? I will tear the drunken fool limb from limb!" snarled the infuriated outlaw. "Paquita—what does this mean? why are you here—why have you left the cave before I gave you leave—"

"For this!" screamed the woman, springing forward, a glimmer of steel in her hand. "You said that whenever you played me false, you were ready to die!" and with an arm nerved by despair, she plunged the keen knife into his breast.

At that instant a roughly-clad form sprang into the room, and discharged a pistol point-blank at Don Estevan.

"Blood for blood!" he grated, with a shrill laugh, as the Californian reeled back, overturning the altar in his fall.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ROXY ANN IN HER GLORY.

WHEN Grumbling Dick saw the outlaws dart forward and cut off his retreat down the valley, and heard their exultant yells as their bullets began to whistle uncomfortably close to his ears, he took in the situation at a single glance. There was only one hope—a slender one, at best. Wrenching around the head of his mule, he rode straight at the steep, rocky hillside. As he did so, he felt a peculiar, numbing shock that caused his brain to reel and a misty cloud to pass over his eyes. Sinking forward he had just consciousness enough left to wind his arms around the neck of Roxy Ann, else he must have fallen headlong to the ground. Perhaps it was as well, or better, that the mule was left to its own guidance, for a few moments later a pistol-bullet glanced along her haunch, inflicting a slight, though stinging wound. This novel spur seemed to give Roxy Ann wings, so rapidly did she traverse the broken and tangled ground, leaping over or dodging around bowlders, trotting swiftly along narrow ledges where even a goat would have proceeded cautiously, slipping and sliding, yet never once losing her footing, while Dick, half-unconscious, clung to her neck with a gripe that nothing seemed able to loosen.

One by one the pursuing outlaws were distanced and fell back to join in bagging their easier prey in the little hole in the hillside, but Roxy Ann, possibly believing herself to be witch-ridden, paused not until full half a dozen very rough and difficult miles had been placed behind her, and her mad race led her into a pleasant valley through which wound a clear, sparkling stream, and where the grass was green, crisp and succulent. Here Roxy Ann stopped short, and turning her head, took a good look at her queer rider. Then, as he made no attempt to dismount, nor to free her windpipe from that uncomfortable grasp, Roxy Ann inaugurated a little circus on her own account, nor did her exertion cease until Grumbling Dick was unceremoniously pitched from the saddle to the ground, where he lay like a dead man for nearly an hour.

At the end of that period his eyes opened, and he felt, though somewhat faint and dizzy, remarkably lively for a dead man. A glimpse of Roxy Ann, grazing near, helped him to recall what had occurred, and crawling down to the water, he proceeded to investigate matters. He found that a bullet had struck him in the right side, but instead of boring him through, had glanced along a rib, emerging nearly in the center of his breast. The severe shock had stunned him, and the loss of blood, thanks to his rough ride, had greatly weakened his frame. Only the sense of his friends' danger could have broken the heavy lethargy that seemed creeping over him, but Dick persisted, managing to wash and bandage his wound, after which he contrived to recapture the festive Roxy Ann and to drag himself into the saddle, though with many a heavy groan of pain.

Grumbling Dick never forgot the ride that followed to the day of his death. Roxy Ann seemed determined to prove that Gospel George had in nowise stretched his accounts of her powers—she seemed possessed by a thousand devils, each and every one urging her on with headlong speed, no matter what difficulties lay in her path. Grumbling Dick managed to keep her head in the general direction which he had decided to follow, but beyond that, he had little more control over her than had the saddle which he bestrode.

For full two hours Roxy Ann kept up her wild progress, but then she came to a sudden halt, almost pitching Grumbling Dick over her head. He was glad enough of the respite. His wound was bleeding, every muscle was sore, and at that moment he would unhesitatingly have made oath that his backbone had been driven up through the crown of his hat, so frightfully had he been jolted.

In a few minutes Dick regained his breath, and with a pluck that in another cause would have immortalized him, he urged the long-eared Pegasus to renew its mad career. But Roxy Ann evidently considered she had done enough

for the honor of her sex, and remained motionless, head sunk, ears drooping and—as Grumbling Dick afterward solemnly affirmed—a sleepy smile curling her lip. Dick kicked and lashed, pounded and cursed—but it was like tickling a rhinoceros with a blade of grass. Dick exhausted his little remaining strength, while Roxy Ann dozed placidly through it all.

Dizzy, half-fainting, Barnes slipped from the saddle to procure a stout club which he spied lying near, but the moment his foot touched ground, Roxy Ann awoke and dashed down the valley at the top of her speed, with a shrill he-haw! that rendered Barnes fairly mad with vexation, and, forgetting the service she had already rendered him, he fired several shots after her from his revolver. But the only effect of this was to increase her speed, and in two minutes more she was out of his sight.

Dick started after, on foot, but his powers were not equal to his will, and with a faint cry he sunk to the ground, senseless.

When consciousness returned he found himself the center of an eager group, whose excited voices and impatient questions fairly bewildered him. Who were they?—had he been followed by Fiery Fred's men and captured?—Ha! there was a familiar face—he knew that voice! and then, as the blessed truth burst upon him, poor Dick fairly broke down and cried like a baby.

The last two weeks had told upon his nerves terribly. One by one his trusted comrades had been murdered; the knowledge that a traitor was among them, securely plotting their extermination; broken rest and unceasing anxiety; all these, together with his wound and the knowledge that the fate of his surviving friends depended upon him alone, had been nobly borne until now—when he knew that the aid he sought was found at last.

A copious draught of whisky soon enabled him to sketch the bare outline of his story, and to beg assistance for his surviving friends. It was eagerly promised, and would not have been withheld even had not Dick spoken of that marvelously rich valley of gold. And yet, these men, nearly a score in number, had resolved to know no rest until they had found Ned Allen's party—to win a share of his golden secret, even at the cost of blood. They had been ranging the hills for weeks, and only for the contrary freak of Roxy Ann, they might never have been any wiser than at first setting out. But they heard the report of Dick's pistol, and crept forward to investigate it. They found him lying senseless, and knew that the long-searched for clew was in their hands.

Hope is a grand restorative, and Grumbling Dick soon declared himself able to take the back trail. His new-found friends were none the less eager, and though their progress was necessarily slow, midnight found them within a mile of the hill cave.

Uncertain what force they would have to encounter, it was determined to steal as near as possible without risking discovery, and then lie in ambush until day-dawn should reveal their game, unless, indeed, the outlaws were to venture an attack upon the cave; in that case, they were to charge, and trust to Providence and their own stout arms to winning their way through.

But the night passed without an alarm; and eagerly, with finger on trigger, each man peered forth from his covert, seeking for the outlaws. Every rock and covert was closely scrutinized, until, at the foot of one boulder, half-concealed by a leafy bush, portions of two human beings were discovered. At a whispered word of command these were covered by a dozen pistols, and as the sharp volley rung out, the prospectors broke cover and charged, with wild yells. But the enemy? Not a man arose to oppose them.

The two half-hidden bodies had not stirred. Grumbling Dick dashed ahead and jerked one of them out by the foot, dead—but stiff and cold! Fearing, he scarcely knew what, Grumbling Dick raised his voice and shouted aloud the names of Tom Weston and Jack Hoover. Almost immediately there was a glad shout from the cave, and Tom Weston sprang out upon the ledge, tossing aloft his old hat, and capering about like a crazy schoolboy.

The meeting was one more easily imagined than described. Until that moment the fugitives had believed Grumbling Dick dead. They had also believed the cave was still besieged, nor could they tell when the outlaws had retreated.

As soon as the joyous greetings and congratulations were over, the men gathered together in council, discussing the best method of carrying on the campaign. That the band of Fiery Fred must be wiped out was evident to all, if they hoped to work their gold-mine in anything like safety. But how?

"Thar's two points," said Grumbling Dick. "One is the cave, 'tother is the house of that greaser feller. I move we take the house fust, sence then we kin hev a good place to leave the wimmin while we're huntin' out the other hole. Ontel we kin captur' that, I reckon it'd be best to leave 'em here, with a couple or three men to guard."

After discussion, Grumbling Dick's views

were generally adopted. Then a hasty meal was prepared, while the men gave their weapons a general overhauling. This occupied them until mid-forenoon, when, leaving three men with the women in the cave, the remainder started for the golden valley, it being their intention to scout around and find the Californian's house, but not to venture an attack before nightfall.

They had just reached the ridge overlooking the valley when they caught the sound of distant firing. The direction corresponded with that in which Grumbling Dick knew the stone building to lie, and it was resolved to press forward at once to investigate the matter.

Two good men were sent ahead as scouts, and two hours later one of them returned hastily with word that he had found the spot where the fighting had occurred.

Eagerly the party pressed on, following close upon the footsteps of the scout, and presently came to a huge upright boulder, the sides of which were plentifully spotted with blood. Around its base lay half a dozen bodies, just as they had fallen. Dick was examining them when he was startled by a sharp cry from the opposite side, and scrambling forward, he saw one of his men supporting the head of a ghastly object.

It was poor Harry Lane, seemingly dead, a terrible knife-wound in his breast, his left arm broken, a bullet-wound through his face, from cheek to cheek. Yet he was still living, and at the faltering voice of Dick, his eyes opened feebly.

"Who did it?" asked Dick, his eyes streaming with tears. "But I needn't ax—'twas them cussed hellhounds—"

"Save him," painfully breathed the wounded miner. "Ned—captive—over there—house—!" and then he fainted away, lying in the man's arms like a dead man.

Grumbling Dick sunk back in mute amazement, scarce able to believe his ears. Ned Allen alive—a captive! He sprang to his feet as if about to rush to the rescue alone and single-handed; but Tom Weston restrained him, and finally made him listen to reason.

More than ever it was necessary for them to await until the shades of night should aid their approach.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AFTER THE STORM, SUNSHINE.

STRONG and true the wronged woman had struck, her arm nerved by the scene of treachery she had just witnessed. Fiery Fred reeled back, vainly striving to keep his feet, but the weapon had sunk too deep. As he fell, Paquita, forgetting all else, sprang to his side and raised his head to her lap, striving in vain to staunch the blood that flowed over her dress. His fall and that of the Californian had been nearly simultaneous, so that the other occupants of the room had scarcely time to comprehend the double tragedy when a wild uproar sounded from the courtyard; shouts and fierce curses—the reports of firearms and the clashing of steel, all telling of a desperate affray.

The sound seemed to revive Fiery Fred. As his eyes opened, they rested upon the figure of Ned Allen, bound and helpless. A hissing curse parted his lips, as he drew a revolver from his bosom and leveled it at his hated rival; but before his trembling hand could render his aim secure, the old man, Paquita's father, wrenched the weapon from his grasp, and then proceeded to sever the bonds that confined the young miner.

"No thanks!" he muttered, as Allen sought to speak. "It is only because he hates you that I am ready to do you a service. I have no love for your race—"

"This way, boys!" shouted the man who had shot down Don Estevan. "This way—yar's the cap'n!"

The next moment he was hurled violently aside, and a wild-looking figure rushed into the room, but pausing abruptly as though blinded by the dazzling lights. Inez, who until now had stood like one utterly bewildered, gave a faint cry and sprang tremblingly to the side of Allen, whose stiffened arms did not prevent him from pressing her closely to his breast.

Then Grumbling Dick, his personal appearance in nowise improved by the blood which streamed from a fresh cut upon his forehead, rushed into the room and almost smothered both Ned and Inez with his joyful greeting, dancing around them both more like a whisky-maddened savage than aught civilized. But as his eyes rested upon the wild, haggard face of the man whose sudden entrance had aroused Inez from her stupor, a quick change came over him. He rubbed his eyes as though unwilling to accept their evidence. Then, flinging his battered hat to the floor, he uttered:

"Waal, I ber durned! of all the owdacious impudence, I do think that is the beatenest!"

"I reckon you never 'spected to set eyes on me ag'in," replied the man, with a sickly smile.

Grumbling Dick uttered a snarling curse, and whipped a pistol from his belt, but the hand of Ned Allen was placed upon his arm, before he could use the weapon.

"He is innocent, Dick—yonder liez the man who played the part of Gospel George—he boasted of it in this very room!"

"He bragged to me of all he was doin', when he had me tied han' an' foot in his cave, over yender," said the real Gospel George. "I hoped you would find him out afore it was too late, but I couldn't git loose to warn ye. She set me loose, to-day, or I reckon I'd 'a' rotted thar. I came straight here—but I'm too late. Cuss the hand that killed him afore—"

Fiery Fred raised his head with a laugh—faint, but still hard and scornful. Gospel George sprang forward and squatted close beside him, unheeding the crimsoned blade with which Paquita threatened him.

"Look at me—look at me close!" he hissed, in a tone of the bitterest hatred. "You knew me once—I am George Hamilton!"

A sharp cry broke from the outlaw's lips, and a swift change passed over his face. He strove to speak, but a dark stream of blood filled his mouth. There was a short, tremulous struggle—then his head sunk back.

Fiery Fred was dead!

The remainder of that night was spent mainly in giving and receiving explanations, but to give the thousand and one questions and their answers here would consume far more space than is at our disposal. The reader can easily supply what little is lacking, after a few brief details.

The prospectors, whom we left with poor Harry Lane, awaiting the coming of night, had found their task of surprise made easy for them by the carousal of the outlaw band. Drunken, almost wholly without arms, the dozen ruffians who survived the first volley were easily slain or taken prisoners. In the morning they were given a hearing—and half an hour later their bodies hung suspended from the limbs of the nearest trees.

Don Estevan, though wounded unto death by the avenging bullet of Zabdriel Grey, lingered through the night and far into the next day, carefully nursed by his daughter and Ned Allen, and finally died, after receiving the extreme unction at the hands of Padre Ignatio. But before he died, he told a strange, startling story of hatred and revenge.

Inez was not his daughter, though the child of the woman who, long years ago, had sworn to become his wife. He had stolen her, in infancy, from the mother who had jilted him in favor of a wealthier man, and ever since had cared for and loved her as his own child. He had fallen into the power of Fiery Fred—through what means he did not state—who soon wrung from him his secret. Inez, through the death of her parents, had become sole heiress to an immense property in Spain, and in order to secure this, the outlaw resolved to make her his legal wife. He made the priest write down his confession, and told him where to look for the papers necessary to prove the identity of Inez—and then died, with the blessing of the woman he had so bitterly wronged ringing softly in his ears.

The gray light of dawn found the trio still conversing over the startling confession they had listened to; but only the substance need be given here. The priest declared that as the holy church held the property in trust, there would be but one way in which Inez could hope to secure it: by going at once to her mother country—But Inez would listen to no more, and as Ned met her soft glance, the dark shade passed from his face like magic. And the priest smiled, well pleased. He knew that though the church would lose one child, it would still gain a princely fortune.

Gospel George was speedily reinstated in the good graces of Grumbling Dick and his friends. His story was a plain, simple one. Though he had fallen over the cliff, he had not been seriously hurt, owing to the fact that the outlaw with whom he was grappling fell undermost and broke his fall. When he recovered his consciousness, he found himself a prisoner, in Fiery Fred's retreat, his head and face clean shorn. With these, Paquita dextrously wove a wig and false beard, which Fiery Fred donned, together with the prisoner's clothes. Thus, a close prisoner, starved, and otherwise tortured to make him confess his fabulous secret of gold, Gospel George passed the time so dextrously employed by the disguised outlaw. Then Paquita came and set him free, giving him arms, food and ammunition, bidding him make his escape through the rear entrance, as he had done once before. This he did, and made all haste toward the stone building, thinking only of revenge. And then he briefly sketched a black, woeful story—the cause of his undying enmity to Fiery Fred; a story that needs no repetition here. Enough that a wife and child had been brutally murdered by the, even then, notorious outlaw and desperado.

Harry Lane finally recovered, though only after a long and tedious struggle for life. Yet those days of slowly-returning strength were made sweet and precious by the love that came to him, through his gentle nurse, Minnie Brady. Though she never forgot Eben Gray, she learned to read her heart better—to know that her girlish love for him was far different from the passion which her handsome patient awoke in her heart. And when the spring came again there was another wedding—or rather two of them—at the old stone building; far different from the first. Padre Ignatio was present, though only as a spectator: and when daylight came it found him already upon his journey to his beloved Spain, bearing a precious paper in his bosom; a paper in which Inez Allen made over all her claims to the Holy Church.

With the extirpation of Fiery Fred's pestilent band all worked smoothly at the Golden Valley. The gold deposit proved fully equal to their most sanguine expectations, and though the news soon spread, and a tremendous rush was the result, our friends had no difficulty in holding their claims in addition to what they had already amassed; and less than a year later found themselves rich men. Then came the double wedding, and shortly after, their return to the States, with only one sorrow to mar their happiness: the knowledge that they had yet to tell the sad, tragic story of those friends, tried and true, whom they had buried in the GOLDEN VALLEY.

THE END.

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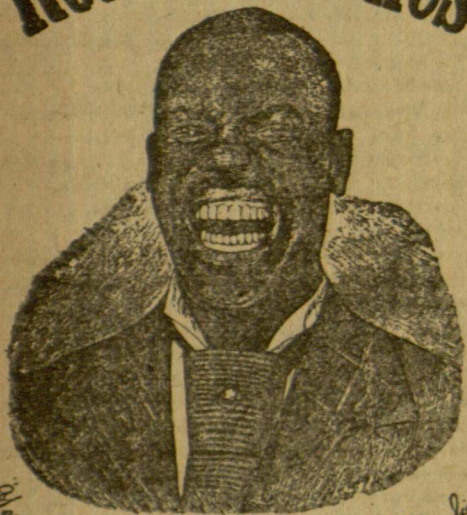
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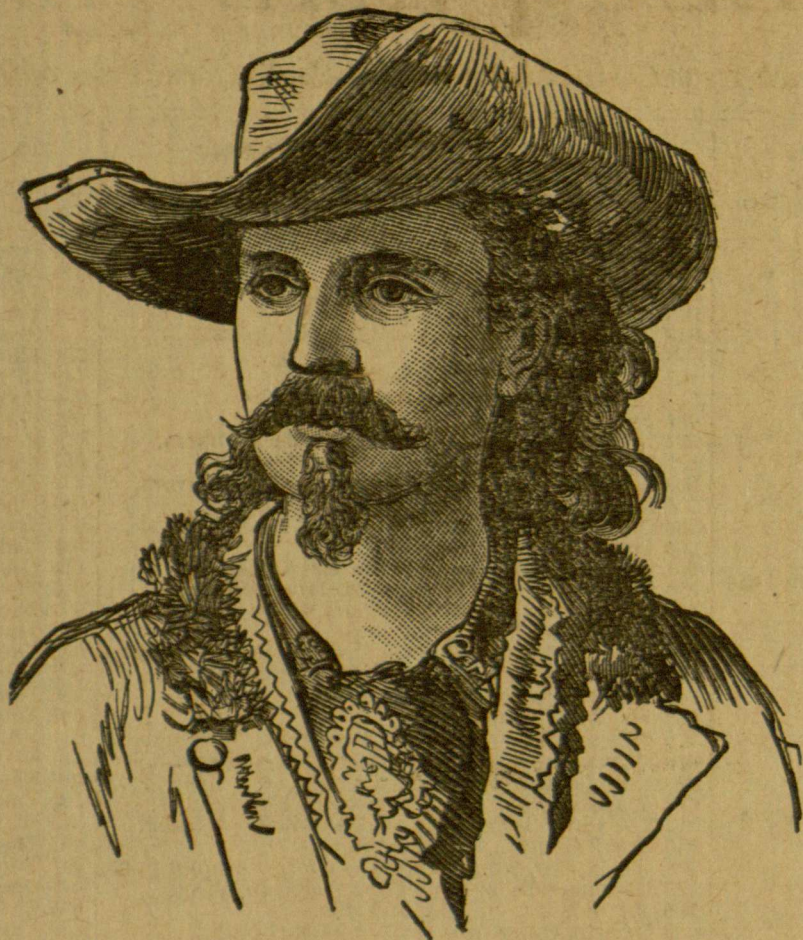
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